

THE HANDSOME
HUMES

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THE HANDSOME HUMES

BY
WILLIAM BLACK

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. I.

LONDON:
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY
LIMITED,
St. Dunstan's House,
FETTER LANE, FLEET STREET, E.C.
1893.

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LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

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THE HANDSOME HUMES.



CHAPTER I.

A COMING OF AGE.

ON a certain night in February a numerous and distinguished company was gradually assembling in the Marie Antoinette room of the Hôtel Métropole, Northumberland Avenue, the occasion being the coming of age of a young man called Sidney Hume. But of all the people arriving or arrived there, none presented so striking a figure as the hostess herself, a woman of quite unusual stature, straight as a wand, yet not without the presence and substantiality befitting her years, which lay between the fifties and sixties. Comely of feature, too,

with a complexion, almost countrified in its clear fresh tones, that accorded well with the silvery gray of her hair ; eyes at once frank and shrewd ; a mouth good-naturedly inclined to smile, and showing, when her lips parted, perfect teeth. For this stately dame—looking all the more stately because of her costume of black velvet and old lace, with an occasional gleam of diamonds—was not at all of an austere demeanour ; nor yet was she blandly and passively gracious, as might fairly have become her height. The welcome that she extended to her guests had more than a touch of cheerful cordiality in it ; there was a quick word here, a humorous glance there ; she could maliciously laugh with this one, and instantly alter her face to receive the next—who chanced to be a bishop. Conscious of her great personal beauty, proud of her son, pleased to have her friends come round her, she appeared to be a very happy woman in these auspicious circumstances,

and she took no pains to conceal the fact. A slight insistence in her speech—a sort of persuasive downrightness—she may have derived from her Scotch upbringing; otherwise she betrayed no trace of accent, as she chatted with this one and that, obviously in the highest of high spirits.

Meanwhile the young man whose four-and-twentieth birthday had brought these people together was also doing his part—moving about the murmuring room with a slip of names in his hand—giving whispered directions as to who was to take down whom to dinner—furnishing introductions where that was needful—and so forth. He also was tall, and of a well-built, slim figure; his face clean-shaven; his features of a distinctly intellectual cast; his brown hair worn rather long; his eyes grave and attentive; his manner somewhat reserved. He seemed inclined to listen respectfully rather than to talk, especially if the person he was addressing happened to be older

than himself; he had not yet acquired that self-confidence, that assurance of success, that knowledge of the world, that gave something of a conquering air to the silver-haired lady who now stood near the door, laughing and talking and welcoming each new arrival. But in the matter of good looks, he was a worthy son of that proud dame: did not he, too, belong to "the handsome Humes"?

By-and-by this reception-chamber—which was filled with a sort of mysterious twilight from rose-shaded lamps and candles—had mustered its complement of guests; and then it was that Sidney Hume gave his arm to a little old lady whose rank entitled her to this precedence, and led the way, the other couples following in due order, the hostess coming last along with the bishop afore-mentioned—the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Wilchester, to wit. Their destination was the drawing-room, which had upon this particular

evening been converted into a dining-room ; and here indeed was a change from the hushed, mysterious, rose-hued chamber they had just left. This great saloon, with its lofty pillars and branching palms, its white and gold walls and roof, was all ablaze with clusters of electric lights ; the long table was a splendour of flowers and silver and crystal ; while from behind a screen that stretched across one portion of the apartment came the softly modulated strains of a stringed band. There was some slight confusion in seeking for places, but that was soon over ; the music ceased ; the guests remained standing ; and the bishop—a little pale-faced, nervous-looking man—said grace. Then they all took their seats ; and the talk began.

Now most of those people knew each other—many of them, indeed, being near relatives ; but here and there were one or two who had not met before ; and among these were a couple of young folk who had

been introduced to each other in the room above. The man was about eight-and-twenty; of anæmic complexion; with soft dark eyes; and beard and moustache clipped in the French fashion; the young lady whom he had brought down was a rather good-looking lass, with an abundance of fluffy blond hair, a pleasant smile, and a pince-nez. Her companion made sure of her name by glancing at the card on the table; then he started off.

“Do you know many of those here to-night?” he asked.

“It is my business,” answered this damsel, with demure eyes, “to know everybody. I am a lady journalist.”

He did not seem much alarmed.

“You don’t say!” he observed, quietly. “I am, in a fashion, connected with newspapers myself—on the other side. Washington.”

“Oh, Washington?” said the young lady, and then she seemed inclined to

giggle—which was wrong. “You have a great deal of society in Washington, haven’t you? I suppose you might consider Washington the headquarters of American society?”

“Why, yes, I suppose it is,” he responded; “especially when Congress is in session. There are plenty of entertainments—and all the Presidential and diplomatic dinners——”

“And does Mrs. Hume understand that you write for the Washington papers?” was the next question—put with perfect seriousness, though there was laughter in the creature’s gray eyes.

“Hardly that,” said this prematurely old young man with the worn face. “I may have mentioned my paper, but I don’t write for it, beyond sending a cable despatch now and again. I am part proprietor, in fact; that is all my connection with journalism. But you said you knew everybody; tell me, then, about our hostess

and her son. You see, I merely made his acquaintance in the smoke-room; we had some talk several times; then he introduced me to his mother, and she was good enough to invite me to this dinner. And here I am. But all I know of her is that she is about the most extraordinarily handsome woman I ever beheld——”

“ Handsome ? ” repeated his neighbour. “ Did you never hear of ‘ the handsome Hays ’ ? ”

His look confessed his ignorance.

“ Not of the three famous beauties—the three tall sisters—who came up from Teviot-side to take all London by storm ? You never heard of ‘ the handsome Hays ’ —‘ the beautiful Miss Hays,’ as they were called—that all the town ran after, so that they had crowds waiting to see them go into a theatre ? Of course it is all ancient history now—five-and-thirty years ago and more; but I’ve had to get up the particulars — for—yes, for an article I am

writing; and besides, I know Mrs. Hume very well——”

At this moment the band behind the white and gold screen began to play ‘There was a lad was born in Kyle.’

“Do you hear that?” the young lady continued. “She is wildly proud of her Scotch lineage; and I shouldn’t be surprised if she had chosen nothing but Scotch airs for this evening. Shouldn’t be in the least surprised——”

“But you were telling me of the three famous beauties,” her companion reminded her.

“Why, this is one of them! There she is. This one was the youngest of the three. And her two sisters were considered to have done well enough—they both married titles; but it was thought that the youngest had done better than either of them when she captured the Squire of Ellerdale—one of the greatest properties in the north of England. For the truth

is they had come to London with nothing but their face for their fortune—and an unbounded pride of race, of course—an old tower on Teviot-side, and a prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer all to themselves—— ”

“ So she was one of the three beauties ? ” the American said, regarding his hostess with something of a curious scrutiny. “ I can well understand it.”

“ Oh, but that was a generation ago,” exclaimed this family chronicler with the unbridled flaxen hair. “ We don’t talk about the handsome Hays now ; it is the handsome Humes. Five sons and four daughters—that is something of a family ; and all of them remarkably good-looking ; and all of them fortunately married and settled, thanks to the engineering capabilities of an extremely astute mamma—all of them, I mean, except this young Sidney, and she’ll soon get him fixed when she thinks the time is come. Oh, she is a

clever one," continued the young person, whose comments on her hostess were not without a spice of malice. "They call her the most successful woman in England. She is a born manager, shrewd and capable, and doing everything with such an appearance of good-humour that you would never suspect her of schemes. The most successful woman in England? I should think so! One after the other, son and daughter—all prosperously established; and then, instead of remaining in possession of Ellerdale Park, as she might have done, she must needs vacate the premises, so that her eldest son should reign undisturbed as the Squire. Of course that leaves her free too. She can move about — Rome, Naples, Nice — wherever the society is most to her mind. At present she has a house at Henley——"

The band began to play 'Loudon's bonnie woods and braes.'

"Didn't I tell you?" said this communi-

cative damsel. "We shall have Scotch airs all the evening—though the Humes of Ellerdale are an English family. But where was I in my information? Oh yes, Henley. I said Henley——"

As she paused for a second, he turned and stole an inquiring glance at her. She seemed amused. When she next spoke it was in a lowered voice.

"Don't look just now—while I am talking to you; but in a second or two turn your attention to the lady who is sitting on Sidney Hume's left——"

"I have already noticed her."

"And not recognised her? Haven't you seen her photographs in the shop windows, among the fashionable beauties?"

And indeed it might have been assumed that the lady thus indicated would be able to hold her own in any such collection; for although she was not so striking in appearance as the statuesque dame at the head of the table, she was sufficiently

attractive-looking in a younger and slighter fashion. What was visible of her figure—through these intervening flowers—was elegant and graceful; her features were refined; her complexion clear and colourless, with just a touch of make-up; her eyebrows high and well marked; her masses of black hair loosely and effectively arranged. And if there was something about her forehead and mouth that denoted considerable decision of character, that, on the other hand, was softened by the expression of her eyes, which were very beautiful eyes—clear gray with dark pupils, intensified by black lashes: eyes that had an amiable and intelligent look, and were rather given, as one might suspect, to quiet and humorous observation. For the rest, her costume was of pale blue crêpe de Chine, open square at the neck, with a collar of white swan's-down; heavy bands of gold were on her gloved arms; but she wore no ornament round her finely modelled throat.

“Who is she?” asked the American, in an undertone.

“That is Lady Helen Yorke,” answered the flaxen-haired maiden, keeping her eyes resolutely fixed upon her plate. “And she is the only daughter—the only child—of the Earl of Monks-Hatton. Would it surprise you to hear that Lord Monks-Hatton has a seat near Henley?”

The young lady (one blushes to confess it) sniggered.

“I don’t quite understand——” her companion said.

“Oh, do you think I would make any suggestion?” she protested. “Certainly not! I couldn’t think of such a thing. But Lady Helen is a great heiress. And she has refused all sorts of offers—so they say; and no one knows why; perhaps she has a bit of a temper, and is rather difficult to please. At the same time she’d better look out; she’s getting on; seven-and-twenty, I should think. And if she were

to take a fancy to one of the handsome Humes? Mind, I don't say anything; only I know that the Monks-Hattons live near Henley—one of their seats; and I know that Mrs. Hume and Lady Helen are great friends; and I perceive, with my own eyes, who it is who is sitting on Sidney Hume's left. For if he had to take down the dowager Duchess because of her rank, there was the other place next him; and a skilfully managing mamma—But perhaps I'm very wicked to suspect such things. And indeed I don't think Sidney Hume is of the marrying kind—from what little I've seen of him. Oh no, for him there's no one like his mother. You could boil down all the women in England into one, and she would be in his eyes nothing to compare with the magnificent mamma. He is just desperately proud of her——”

“And she of him?”

“Oh, I suppose so! Those Humes have been so courted and flattered that they

think all the virtues and graces and good looks in England belong to their family by rights."

'Sweet Annie frae the sea-beach came,' the band played behind the screen; and perhaps it was the gentleness of the melody that interposed to soften the acerbity of this young lady's remarks; at all events, she went on to speak of Sidney Hume himself in quite a friendly and kindly way. She said it was a pity he mured himself up in his college at Oxford. Degrees, honours, fellowships, should be reserved for persons of ungainly physique. Men of heroic mould should come out into the great world, to play their part.

Meanwhile what of the 'most successful woman in England,' who was seated up there at the head of the table? Surely she must have confessed to herself that this was a very gay and brilliant scene over which she was presiding—the profusion of flowers being especially remarkable: camellias,

tulips, hyacinths, primulas, cyclamens, with here and there masses of maidenhair-fern in the tall silver dishes. Radiant light and colour; a scented atmosphere; soft music stealing in from time to time; animated talk, with little bursts of laughter: what more could be desired? No wonder that this gracious hostess, when she turned from contemplating the busy table to answer the remarks of the bishop who sat next her, wore a pleased and complacent air!

“My views, bishop, about Sidney?” she said. “I hardly know that I have any—any more than he has himself—the long, lazy boy! Oh no!” she added, instantly correcting herself. “Not lazy—not at all; but the fact is that acquiring knowledge seems to come so easily to him, and he is interested in such a multitude of things, that you would be astonished to find how much he had stored up, in that apparently idle and dawdling way of his. Just an encyclopædia, without taking any trouble

about it! And yet what good is it all to him? And even if he were to devote himself to something special, the professions are all overstocked. There's the Indian civil service, no doubt: that offers good prospects for a young fellow who has done as well at his university as Sidney has done—but I fear it is too late in the day——” Here she laughed. “Well, bishop, I must tell you the truth. Sometimes I think that as I have given up all my other sons and my daughters, I should be allowed to keep my single remaining boy to myself. And then again I reproach myself for such a selfish feeling, and think I would rather give him up too, if I could see him comfortably settled. It would only be an additional home for me to visit occasionally; and you know I have so many homes, with all those boys and girls married, that I never can accept half the invitations——”

“You are a fortunate mother-in-law,” said his lordship, with a little laugh.

“And as for Sidney,” continued Mrs. Hume, in her blithe way. “Who knows what may happen? Do you remember the old ballad, bishop?”

‘Oh, father, oh, father,
An ye think it fit,
We’ll send him a year
To the college yet :
We’ll sew a green ribbon
Round about his hat,
And that will let them ken
He’s to marry yet.’

Greater wonders than that have happened.”

“Ah, I perceive—I perceive,” said the bishop, thoughtfully. “And when does Mr. Sidney close his university career?”

“The sooner the better, I should be inclined to say, if only I could get him to tear himself away from his beloved college. I suppose I shall have to bribe him; and the bribe will have to be something Greek. I shall have to promise to help him in hunting for Greek gems, or in excavating some Greek ruin, or in raising a rebellion

among the Greeks of some Turkish island. A rebellion—I shouldn't at all wonder if he were to devote this little fortune that now becomes his to some such mad enterprise ; and then, after all, I might have to support a beggar son in the end."

Now amid these various plans and projects in connection with this young man's future, that contained in the lines quoted by Mrs. Hume must have sunk into the bishop's mind ; and eventually it paved the way for a very pretty little incident. On an occasion of this kind, his lordship remarked to his neighbour, formal speech-making was unnecessary and uncalled-for ; still—might not a few words, expressing the good wishes of the company, be permitted ? Mrs. Hume smiled most grateful thanks : it had been her own secret desire that the bishop should perform this kindly office, though she had not ventured to say so. Then, as there chanced to be a lull in the traffic of the servants, the bishop got up.

There was instant silence. Naturally and inevitably he began by saying he would not make a speech ; and forthwith proceeded to make it. It was a clever and incisive little oration, whether it was unpremeditated or not ; there was only one Latin phrase in it —about the obligation of maintaining the dignity of an ancient name ; and there were some ingenious references to the happy fortune of one who had in his turn inherited certain qualities of character and person that had rendered his family distinguished through more than one generation. Finally, said the good bishop, though he would not touch upon the legal conditions that had constituted this second coming of age, nevertheless Mr. Sidney (as he might be allowed to call him, having known so many older members of the family) had now to be complimented on having fully succeeded to man's estate ; and they might be pardoned if they looked forward to yet another important occasion. That occasion would

arise when their young friend should present to them his chosen helpmeet and life companion ; and she (he was sure) would receive from all of them the same welcome and the same earnest good wishes for all blessings, temporal and eternal, which they were now heartily tendering to himself. Quite an excellent little speech ; and when the bishop had finished, the men rose and raised their glasses ; there were murmured cries of “ Sidney ! Sidney ! ” “ Hume ! Hume ! Good luck to you ! ” and the like. It may have been a mere coincidence, or it may have been one of the artful wiles of the founder of the feast, but at this moment the band interposed with ‘ Come fye let us a’ to the bridal ! ’

Then young Hume got up. It was an awkward position ; but he bore himself modestly, and that bespoke favour. His words, indeed, were few—thanks for their presence and their good wishes, and so forth ; but it was thus he wound up :

“His lordship has been good enough to hint of another occasion when I might be able to present to you a helpmeet and companion—a sweetheart, I suppose. But, ladies and gentlemen, I have already chosen my sweetheart. And I dare say every one thinks that his sweetheart is the incomparable one of all the world—in beauty, and kindness, and accomplishments, and tried affection. At least that is my case——”

“Goodness me!” said the flaxen-haired young lady to her American acquaintance. “Is he going to announce his engagement?”

“That is my case,” young Hume continued. “And I cannot do better, ladies and gentlemen, than ask you to be so very kind as to drink her health.”

He raised his glass—and bowed low to his mother. It was simply, and naturally, and gracefully done; and it was a great success—much clapping of hands ensuing; while as for Mrs. Hume, though she ex-

claimed "The rascal!" she was immensely delighted; she blushed and laughed like a school-girl—at sight of those upraised glasses; and demanded of the bishop what should be done to a boy that thus made a fool of his old mother.

"Bravo, Sidney!" cried a brother-in-law, who had the look of an M. F. H. about him. "If you stick to them sentiments, you'll save yourself a heap of trouble in this world."

And the nervous little bishop laughed and applauded too, and was quite proud of his share in the impromptu performance; he said if he had been told beforehand he could not more conclusively have elicited an opinion which did so much honour to both mother and son.

And in due course of time the long and merry evening came to an end; and when the guests, in various groups, had bidden good-bye to their hostess and were proceeding to take their departure, Sidney

Hume went along to the outer hall to see them off. Thither also, as soon as the room was finally cleared, wandered Mrs. Hume and Lady Helen, the former with her hand placed affectionately within the arm of the latter; and there these two remained as spectators, watching the carriages come up and drive away. Accordingly, when the young man had fulfilled his duty and was returning through the hall, he found the two ladies awaiting him.

“Sidney,” said his mother, in her gaily masterful way, “we want you. Helen is coming up to my room to have a little private confabulation over the events of the evening, and you must come too, and get us something in the way of a night-cap, you know, for the sake of our nerves.”

“Very well, mother,” he said, obediently; and he followed them up the staircase and along the corridor, until they had arrived at Mrs. Hume’s sitting-room.

But no sooner were they within this

warm and cheerfully lit apartment than it became clear that Mrs. Hume was herself going to be responsible for the snugness and comfort of this little family party—if so it might be regarded. She rang the bell and ordered coffee. She went to a sideboard and produced a bottle of Benedictine, with three liqueur glasses. She had three comfortable arm-chairs drawn in towards the fire. And presently, when she had brought the Benedictine and the glasses over, she took a box of cigarettes—perhaps as a temptation, perhaps as a jest—and offered it to Lady Helen.

Curiously enough, at the very moment that the younger lady received the box into her hands, she happened to glance instinctively towards the tall young man who still stood by the table; and apparently she saw in his face—not disapproval, for that would have been impertinence: what right of criticism or control over her had he? but—an indefinable something

that instantly caused her to change her mind. She rose from her chair and put the box on the mantel-shelf.

"How can you bring such a charge against me, Mrs. Hume?" she protested, with laughing indignation. "You only saw me once—for a piece of mischief. Here, Mr. Sidney; don't you want the cigarettes?"

"No, thank you," he said, without drawing near.

"Oh, you need not offer them to Sidney," his mother interposed, as she settled herself in the chair opposite that of Lady Helen. "He wouldn't smoke in the presence of a woman for ten thousand worlds. It's one of his fads."

"It is merely an old-fashioned prejudice, and it hurts no one," he said, in self-defence.

"I am not so sure—I am not so sure," his mother insisted. "I like to see a man smoking; it makes for companionship and

sociability. For example, now, at this moment, if you were smoking, you would be seated in this chair between Helen and me, telling us all about the ghost that is playing pranks at St. Mary Hall, showing us your latest treasures—wretched little books that are only rare because of their wrong paging—and so on ; instead of which you are lounging over there by the table, taking no notice of us.”

It was a direct reproof ; and he had been well brought up. He came and took the empty seat between these two : the three of them made a kind of semicircle round the fire.

“ Well, I have nothing wonderful to show you,” he said. “ But I picked up a couple of very good coins to-day ; they may interest you.” He took them from his waistcoat pocket, and handed one of them, a small gold piece, to his mother. “ That is a *stater* of Philip II. of Macedon—the great time, you know, for coinage—and if

you look at the head of Apollo on that one, you will find it perfectly beautiful—something like the head of the Venus of Milo, in fact. The other side? Oh, that is the king driving a *biga*."

And had he no word for the Lady Helen, who sat mute and listening, with perhaps a furtive glance from time to time at the young man himself, at the fine set of his head and shoulders, his somewhat pale intellectual features, and the soft brown of his hair? At last he turned to her, and offered her the other coin.

"That is a bronze of Hadrian," he said, with a certain indifference. "Nothing very uncommon, except, perhaps, as to its condition."

But she appeared to be much interested in the two small figures in classic dress, the one standing and holding out his hand to the other kneeling, with the legend surrounding them, "RESTITVTORI ACHAIÆ." She lingered over this little

bit of property, which had come warm from his pocket. "And S. C.," she said, "what does that mean?"

"Senatus consulto—by decree of the Senate," he answered her.

"And P. P.? Not parish priest?" she asked again, venturing to raise her smiling eyes to his.

"Pater patriæ," he responded, as he somewhat carelessly received back both coins. And therewith he rose. "I am afraid I must bid you good-night now," he said to the two women.

"Sidney!" his mother exclaimed. "When I thought we should have a nice quiet little chat all by our three selves! And you cannot be going to bed yet——"

"I have to finish tinkering at the 'Frogs,'" he explained, if that was an explanation.

"Tinkering at the frogs?" she repeated.

"The 'Frogs' of Aristophanes. There is to be a translation accompanying the

acting version—the O. U. D. S., you know—and I must send it off by the first post to-morrow morning. So good-night, mother dear.” He went forward and kissed her. “Good-night, Lady Helen,” he said, shaking hands with the younger woman.

Lady Helen followed him with her eyes—those meditative, inscrutable eyes—as he left the room; and then, when he had actually gone, she sank back in her chair, with some little look of petulant disappointment.

“Bother the ‘Frogs’ of Aristophanes!” said Mrs. Hume, with admirable good-humour. “But now, Helen dear, you can have your cigarette if you like.”

CHAPTER II.

CROWHURST FARM.

EARLY next morning Mrs. Hume was up at Paddington station, and she was accompanied by Lady Helen, who had been her guest in town. They were standing at the book-stall when a man approached the taller of the two ladies and said,

“I beg your pardon, madam——”

She turned. He handed to her a glove she had accidentally dropped.

“Oh, thank you very, very much,” she said.

He raised his hat respectfully and passed on, rejoining his companion, with whom he had been walking up and down the platform.

“What an odd-looking man!” observed Mrs. Hume, glancing after him.

“That is a remarkably pretty girl who is with him,” said Lady Helen.

Meanwhile those two, unaware that they had attracted any notice or comment, were continuing their idle stroll to and fro, entirely engrossed in each other's talk. The one of them (he who had picked up Mrs. Hume's glove for her) was a powerfully built man, especially about the shoulders; of sallow complexion; dark eyes and hair, the latter with a touch of gray; and short side-whiskers. He was dressed quietly and neatly; and his manner was quiet; indeed, his unobtrusive, almost deprecating demeanour, and his submissive eyes, joined to the firmness of his features and the massive strength of his frame, were somehow suggestive of a bull-dog and the docile placidity of that animal. As for his companion, that was another matter. This young creature — here on a dull and

commonplace platform—seemed to be the very incarnation of our English spring-time—the ideal spring-time, that is to say, the spring-time of our lyric poets, the spring-time of waving daffodils and saffron-tinted dawns, of brooks and meads and budding willows, the spring-time of youth and merriment, of gay garlands and jocund sports, of swift glances and sweet kisses and coyness. Not tall she was, yet of a perfect symmetry; her neck slender, the head well poised; her complexion of the rarest freshness—making one think of clambering wild roses, both snow-white and pink; her hair of a light sunny brown, and not so carefully garnered up but that there were stray tags and tangles here and there, especially about the region of the ears; her eyes of a pellucid blue, full of liquid light, very honest and simple of expression, meeting a stranger with frank unconcern, and then instantly withdrawn in maiden bashfulness. The dark man with the

submissive expression and the powerful shoulders stooped a little and walked deliberately; this fresh-coloured, sunny-haired young creature, so light and free of step was she, so erect and easy and lissome of carriage, so blithe and happy and eager of air, looked as though she longed to be away among daisied meadows, with swift running and laughter, and the scattering of blossoms to the April winds.

She nestled close to her father, and her arm was tightly enclosed within his.

“Dodo, I am all shivering with anticipation!” she said, with smilingly parted lips.

“Ah, but you will be disappointed, Nan; you must count on being disappointed,” he said, almost anxiously. “The day is dull; everything will look dismal. And I’m afraid we are making the experiment too soon; we should have waited till the end of March, or perhaps even the beginning of May; at present there is nothing out in the garden but snowdrops and crocuses;

and the woods are bare—you won't find a single primrose yet ; I went looking about everywhere the day before yesterday. If I could only have found one as an encouragement for you—— ”

“ Dodo, I am not going to be disappointed ! ” she said, interrupting him with a certain wilfulness. “ I want to see the spring-time from the very beginning—to watch the very first symptoms of life ; there will be a new wonder every day ; and you and I must hunt together, you know. Oh, I can tell you, the expeditions I have been looking forward to—— ”

“ Yes, yes, Nan, but you are expecting too much,” he said, with the same anxiety. “ You won't find things all as well arranged and comfortable as they were at the vicarage, perhaps ; you see, you had everything there—— ”

“ Everything—except you, Dodo ! ” she interposed.

“ It's very nice of you to say so, Nan.

But—but you must not expect too much of Crowhurst. You will find many things wrong. And it will be a great change for you; you may not like it——”

“Dodo, what are you talking about!” she remonstrated, warmly, “when the very dream of my life has come true at last!”

The guard unlocked the doors; these two entered a carriage, and no one sought to follow; and presently the train was slowly creeping out from the platform. When they got away from the station and its surroundings the daylight whitened somewhat; but it was a long time before they reached the open country; and even then, when there was anything of an extended view, it was a wintry-looking landscape that lay before them—a landscape of gray, green, and black—the silvery gray of a clouded sky, the harsh green of dank pasture, the purple-black of trees and hedges. But was there not also a tremulous gleam of sunshine here and there, a faint glow on some

field of golden stubble or along the red furrows of some newly ploughed land? This man, at all events, was eagerly, piteously, trying to persuade himself that those clouded heavens were going to break apart, that those vague shafts of light were growing stronger.

“Oh yes, Nan,” he was saying. “I shouldn’t wonder if we got a little sunlight, after all, so that your first impression of Crowhurst may not be quite so unfavourable. There is really some sunlight coming through.”

“Dodo, it is the very perfection of a spring day!” she insisted. “Don’t you feel how soft and mild the air is? And how can you talk of unfavourable impressions, when I am as happy as a bird let out of a cage? Only I wish this train would hurry quick—quick!”

They changed at Twyford, and shortly thereafter reached Henley, which was their destination. On the platform they were

met by a grave-looking elderly man, who received instructions about the luggage; then they were free to go.

“That was John, the gardener, Nan,” her father explained to her. “I don’t know much about his skill as a gardener, but I got an excellent character with him, and he will do any odd thing that’s wanted about the house. Now let us see if the boy has brought down the trap for us.”

They passed out from the station into the clearer light and air, and presently Miss Anne Summers found herself regarding, with mingled surprise and admiration, an exceedingly pretty little Stanhope phaeton in darkly varnished oak, in the shafts of which was a smallish, clever-looking animal of a light cream-colour, with black mane and tail. At the horse’s head stood a diminutive tiger in livery—boots, brass-buttoned coat, and tall hat, all very trim and correct, the whole turn-out being entirely smart and business-like.

“You don’t think, Nan,” said the girl’s father, rather timidly regarding her—“you don’t think—it doesn’t occur to you—that there may be a little suggestion of the circus——”

“Oh, how could you imagine such a thing!” she exclaimed, as she stroked the satin-smooth neck of the animal. “He is just a beautiful creature!”

“I’m glad you don’t mind,” her father said. “It wasn’t for his looks I bought him, you know—he has plenty of other qualities, as you will find—and I was a little afraid you might not care for his appearance.”

“Why, if there’s anybody in England knows better than you, Dodo, what kind of a horse to buy, I should like to know where he is!” she said, as she went on to examine with the greatest curiosity every part of the polished harness—from the rosetted head-piece, the brown leather collar, the brass-tipped shafts, the shining pad-terrets, and

so on, right aft to the step enabling the small tiger to jump into his perch.

"I'm glad you don't mind, Nan," he said. "For this is my little present for you—a sort of welcome, you know. It is to be entirely your own—as a kind of amusement——"

"Oh, Dodo, Dodo!" the girl said, in an undertone. "What next?—what next?"

"Get up, then, Nan," he said.

"What? am I to drive?"

"Why not?"

"That will spoil the appearance of the whole thing!"

"Ah, but I know better, Nan. You drive very well——"

"The vicar's pony-carriage!"

"But you have a good style. Oh yes, I know," he said; and he followed her into the trap, as she took up the reins and the whip, while the miniature groom released the horse's head and got in behind. "I know, Nan," he said, as the horse, without

any preliminary cantrips, at once went forward into a rapid and easy pace. "You have a good style. Shoulders square; hands low down and well in. I don't like to see people reaching out as if they were driving an American trotter. Why, if the horse did make a mistake, they would be over on the top of him in a second—no chance of recovery!"

"Oh, Dodo, isn't that beautiful?" she cried, looking at what now came into view.

And yet it was only a passing glimpse they got of river-side Henley: the smooth olive-green stream; the low-arched bridge, with a shimmer of silvery sunlight on it, accurately mirrored on the still surface; a few red-tiled houses among leafless trees; the wooded heights above in a pale February mist. There was not a single boat moving anywhere; nor did there seem to be any life about Henley itself, until they turned the corner and drove into the main street.

“It is quite a pretty town in summer-time, Nan,” he said, as if deprecating any harsh judgment. “It is my fault, you know, if I have brought you too soon.”

“Why, how could you bring me too soon, Dodo?” she responded—“for me, at least. If you only knew—if you could only guess—how I have been looking forward to this day! I think it is too good to be true—I think it will all vanish, and I shall find myself back in the vicarage again, and no Dodo with me at all.”

From Hart Street they turned into Bell Street and so entered upon the Oxford road; and in due time they came in sight of a long stretch of highway which he told her was known far and wide as the Fair Mile—a noble highway indeed, with a wide space of common on each side of it, the common in its turn being bounded by twin rows of magnificent elms. And now the spring day seemed to be really declaring itself. Not only was the air warm and sweet, but the

sunshine appeared to gain in strength; the low-lying hill on their right hand shone a dull gold, and along the top of it the leafless woods lay against a sky that had here and there a glimmer of blue. The spirits of this sallow-faced, quiet-looking man seemed to rise a little in view of the cheerful outlook.

“Oh, yes, indeed, Nan,” he said to her, “you have a very good style in driving. You sit well; you keep your shoulders square and your hands in. Many’s the time I’ve seen you driving the pony-carriage when you little thought I was looking at you.”

“What?” she said, in astonishment. “Do you mean to say, Dodo, you were ever near Chipping Pawlet without coming to see me?”

“Oh, well,” he answered her, rather uneasily, “it would not have done, Nan, you know. There were the rules and regulations to be observed. The vicar and his wife might not have liked it. And I could

guess what would happen if I intercepted you ; you would have begged for another day at Bristol, whereas the appointed days came frequently enough."

"Ah, did they?" she said. "Not for me, then. I used to look forward to the Bristol day as the one thing to live for ; and you always brought fine weather with you, Dodo, for the beautiful woods and the downs. And now there's going to be nothing but Bristol days—it's going to be all Bristol days—seven in a week!"

"I hope they won't tire you, Nan," said he, timidly.

She laughed ; the happiness shining in her eyes was sufficient answer.

When they got to The Traveller's Rest—a solitary public-house of white-painted boards—they still held on in the Oxford direction, but after a space they left the main highway, and he directed her, by a series of farm roads, into an upland region of copse and heath and spinney, with un-

dulations of field and pasture, the heights and hollows intersected by hedges and rows of still leafless trees. And at last they came to a fenced-in enclosure which seemed to contain a good deal of green—the green of spruce and pine and ivied stumps; there was a glimpse of red-tiled roofs and chimneys over a tall hedge of box and laurel; then a white gate that the small groom jumped down to open.

“This is Crowhurst, Nan,” her father said, regarding her with diffident apprehension. “I’m afraid you’ll find it rather lonely—it is rather out of the way, isn’t it? But then I thought you could have your choice, you know, for there’s plenty of life and gaiety at Henley, especially a little later on in the year. I hope you won’t find it too secluded.”

“Oh, Dodo, it is a perfect Paradise!” she cried.

She walked the horse slowly forward, taking possession with her eyes, as it were,

of every feature of the place—the shrubbery, the lawn with its plots of snowdrop and crocus, the red-tiled little porch, the yellow-gray frontage, the white wood-work, the irregular gables, the small out-jutting conservatory, and then the stables and coach-house, apparently evolved out of older farm-buildings, for there was a stain of green on the ruddy roofs, where a brass weather-cock glittered in the sun.

“It is rather shut in on this side, don’t you think, Nan?” he said. “There’s a better view from the other side of the house; from your window especially there is a very nice view—over the woods and hollows. But come away in.”

She followed him into the toy house of which she was to be mistress, and here was a trim little maidservant awaiting them.

“Jane,” said he, “run and tell cook to hurry up with luncheon; Miss Anne must be hungry.”

And then he began to show her over the place ; and she went from room to room with an ever-increasing delight and wonder ; for how had he been able to do all this by himself, even to the bowls of daffodils placed here and there ? But it was when she entered her own room upstairs that her gladness and gratitude reached their climax. It was not a large room, but it was undoubtedly the best situated of any in the house ; there were two windows, one giving a glimpse of the roadway and a plantation of young larch, the other commanding a spacious view southward over the garden and orchard, and over the more distant fields and hollows and wooded heights that rose into the pale sunshine of the spring sky. These were but externals. When she turned to the fittings and adornments of this chamber—to the prints and drawings, the seven-volume edition of Tennyson in a little bookshelf slung near the bed head, a large illustrated Herrick on the table by the

window, the snowdrops and violets placed in glass tubes and dishes on the mantleshelf, and a hundred similar evidences of thoughtfulness and attentive forecast—she began to recall and to understand the meaning of many a mysterious question that had been addressed to her when he and she were walking on Clifton Down or driving along the Somersetshire lanes. She knew now. Far away back he had been trying to find out what particular things she would like to have in the room that was to be specially her own, and he had forgotten nothing.

“Nan!” he exclaimed, in great alarm—for though she had turned to the window, he could see that tears were running down her cheeks—“Nan! I knew it would be too lonely for you—I knew it; but never mind—we will find some other place—oh yes—we will find some place you will like better.”

“Oh, Dodo, Dodo, don’t make me ashamed!” she said; and she took his

hand in both of hers and kissed it in gratitude. "It isn't that—you know it isn't that; it is because you are so good to me."

"Then you are not—disappointed?"

"Disappointed!" she said, smiling through her tears. "When I cannot find words to tell you how beautiful everything is, and how kind you are to me!"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said he, recovering himself directly. "What a fright you gave me! Well, come away down, Nan: luncheon must be about ready; I hear Jane coming and going."

So she flung her hat and jacket on the coverlet and followed him downstairs, where she found the dining-room table very prettily laid out, with more daffodils and snowdrops and crocuses, pale purple and white and gold.

"Now which do you think you will have, Nan?" he said, going first of all to the sideboard. "There will be cutlets coming

in a moment, with mashed potatoes; and there's a hot steak and kidney pie, with mushrooms. I wasn't quite sure of the fish, you see, in a small inland town, but I must find out about that later on. Or, if you would rather have something cold, here's some pressed beef that looks pretty fair; and there's a fowl, and ham, and a lobster, and a tongue, and there's some endive salad that I think you'll like."

"Dodo," she remonstrated, "if I am going to manage this house, it must be in a very different fashion. What extravagance! Two hot dishes for luncheon! I cannot allow such a thing."

"It's all very well, Nan," he said, doggedly, "but I am not going to have you treated here as you were at the vicarage. No; when I went there I used to think the food was just a little too meagre. And if you don't care to wait for anything hot, well, there are other cold things here—oh yes, a lot of other things; that fool of a girl

hasn't opened half of them. There's caviare—caviare is very nice on oat-cake—and there are sardines. I wonder where the mischief she has put the opener?"

He searched about and found it, and then he proceeded to prise into the metal case.

"Dodo," she said, laughing, "don't you know that refined and superior persons consider it very ignoble to put importance on what one eats or drinks?"

He stopped and looked at her inquisitively. His hand relaxed its grasp of the instrument. "Yes, I suppose that is so," he said. He came away from the sideboard. "Only, I thought you might be hungry, Nan."

She instantly perceived the mistake she had made. "But I am—furiously hungry," she said at once. "And if you could conveniently open that box, or give me a slice of tongue, or a piece of the lobster—it's really quite delightful to see such a display on a sideboard. No, wait a moment, Dodo ;

here come the hot things. Suppose we begin with a cutlet?"

And so they both sat down, and he helped her to a cutlet and some of the steaming-hot mashed potatoes; but there were early pease as well, and likewise there was a dish of asparagus with stems not as thick as a slate-pencil.

"What dreadful extravagance!" said she, shaking her head. "I cannot permit this to go on, Dodo; I cannot really."

"I tell you, Nan," he said, with a certain stubbornness, "that you must break away from those vicarage traditions. No doubt it was very simple and wholesome fare for a young girl, and I did not like to interfere when I saw you took nothing but water with your meals; but now you are a woman, and the mistress of a house, and—and you must have some wine, Nan, however little. That is Burgundy in the decanter—very soft and nice; and the other decanter is sherry—it is old and dry and quite harmless;

and this is hock—Marcobrunner of '71—I know you will like the perfume of it when it is poured into your glass. Besides there's some light sillery, if you would prefer that, only I thought you would have that for dinner."

"Oh, Dodo, how you spoil me!" she said. And then she added, with a sigh of resignation, "But it has been like that all my life long—ever since I can remember."

So they proceeded with their luncheon; and when it was over, she went into the hall and rummaged in the pockets of his overcoat until she found his pipe and tobacco-pouch, and these she brought and put on the table beside him. But he did not take them up.

"By-and-by, Nan," he said, in an evasive way. "I shall be going out for a stroll presently, through the plantation."

"And so this is not to be a Bristol day after all!" she said, reproachfully. "What was there more memorable about a Bristol

day than the smell of tobacco—nothing of that kind known at the vicarage, you may be sure; and I was looking forward to having this house so saturated with the scent of tobacco that whenever I came out of my room in the morning I should at once say to myself, ‘Ah, this is going to be another Bristol day!’ Come, to please me, Dodo!”

He took up the tobacco-pouch and filled his pipe; she brought him a lighted taper; and they both drew their chairs in towards the fire.

“You see, Dodo,” she continued, “you can go for your stroll afterwards, while I have my interview with the cook and the housemaid, to find out about the tradesmen’s pass-books, and a number of things like that. I must have my code of laws and regulations, you know, just as Mrs. Honeyman has: she showed me all how it was arranged. And then about half-past four, if you care to come in for a cup of

tea, I should like to go out for a little walk with you, in the twilight, when you hear the thrushes best."

Later on that evening those two were again seated before the fire—he at the table, where there was some whiskey and water as an accompaniment to his pipe; she at his feet, shading her face with the book from which she had been reading to him. Now, however, they had fallen into some discussion of the events of the day.

"And remember it is only an experiment, Nan," he said, with a return of that timid solicitude which had marked his demeanour in the morning. "I don't bind you to anything. We could try some other place—some other way. You are young; and perhaps I don't quite know what you would like. We could go away elsewhere, Nan. You may find it too lonely, after all."

"Ah, Dodo, Dodo, don't talk like that!" she said. And then she leant her arm and her cheek affectionately on his knee, so

that the firelight and the lamp-light played hide-and-seek among the tags and curls of sun-brown hair that strayed about her small ear. "It seems far too beautiful and wonderful to be real. And I never did think such happiness would come true; but it has, hasn't it, Dodo? At last!—at last!"

CHAPTER III.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER.

CLAD in abundant furs, the Lady Helen Yorke was standing on the steps of Monks-Hatton Hall, leisurely buttoning her driving-gloves; and in front of her and awaiting her was a mail-phaeton, with a pair of handsome grays more or less submitting to the pacific ministrations of the groom at their head. Her companion was of maturer age than herself—a lady of quiet and serious aspect, who rarely spoke unless when she was spoken to. On the other hand, when these two had at length got into their places, when the younger of them had taken possession of reins and whip, and when a touch of the silk had sent the horses

forward, it speedily appeared that Lady Helen was in a particularly gay and talkative mood, though, as usual, her eyes maintained a certain mysterious reticence in their expression of humour or sarcasm, as the case might be.

“You are so dark and secret, Mrs. Spink,” she was saying, as the carriage rolled along the Fair Mile. “Spink by name, but Sphinx by nature. One can never tell what you are brooding over. I can only guess now, for example, what you are thinking of my having dragged you away at this unearthly hour, when I might have taken Willis with me. But then, you see, Mrs. Spinkie, it’s a long drive to Oxford, and the horses will want at least a couple of hours’ rest in the middle of the day; and what could I do with Willis all that time? What does she know about architecture—about colleges and quadrangles and chapels? Never mind. If this is another deadly injury, I dare say you have your revenge.

I should not be in the least surprised to discover that you wrote articles for the Sunday Radical papers, denouncing the brutal selfishness and tyranny and hard-heartedness of the British nobility. Oh yes, I dare say we catch it——”

“Of course you are only joking, Lady Helen,” her companion said, in her tranquil and grave fashion; “but if I were capable of any such thing, surely it would be a piece of the worst ingratitude. Ever since I came to Monks-Hatton I have received nothing but kindness; nothing could equal her ladyship’s thoughtfulness and consideration——”

“Oh yes,” broke in the other, in her wilful way. “Mamma is always thoughtful and considerate; it is mamma’s daughter who is selfish and cruel and hard-hearted—dragging poor Mrs. Spinkie away from all her home duties and her home comforts, and driving her through a lonely country on a gloomy March morning. I

understand. I can guess how you are plotting out your revenge. Those iniquitous people called the aristocracy will catch it next Sunday or the Sunday after. Well, well!"

But whatever the taciturn or discreet Mrs. Spink may have been thinking, she could hardly have resented being called away from constant attendance on even the most considerate of invalids to join in this impromptu excursion. The morning was overclouded, it is true, but yet it was beautiful in a way; and the landscape was an English-looking landscape of early spring—of soft greens and purple-grays mainly; a glimpse of a red-tiled farm-building here and there; a pond struck into a shimmer of silver by the wind; the beech woods carpeted with the bronze and copper leaves of the previous autumn. Then, by-and-by, they got up on to very high land—for the drive between Henley and Oxford is one of the pleasantest in

England; and from the lofty highway running between strips of heath and common they had spacious views over the wide champaign country, with the variegated pastures and homesteads and leafless woods gradually ascending towards a line of hill that sloped away to the west. The air was quite mild and soft for the beginning of March. And here was a companion in the gayest of good-humours; surely there was nothing to complain of?—nor, in truth, did Mrs. Spink appear to complain.

Then at last there appeared before them a vision of ghostly gray spires and towers rising above a vague wilderness of elms and pollard willows, with a distant white glint of water; and presently they were driving over Magdalen Bridge and past the Botanic Gardens, and so into the midst of the High Street. The younger of these two ladies, who had now grown silent, wore a serenely impassive air; she seemed to be chiefly occupied with her

horses, as was natural; but her eyes were alert, and it may be presumed that there were few objects in this famous thoroughfare that escaped her covert scrutiny as she made her way along. They stopped at the Mitre. The charge of the phaeton was resigned to the groom, who departed to the stables. And then the travellers entered the hotel.

But when Lady Helen came out again she had undergone a transformation. On this mild morning the unnecessary furs had been discarded; and now she appeared in a walking dress chiefly of black, with blue sleeves, and a broad band of blue round the base of the skirt; her hat was also of blue and black, with a single feather of bright golden yellow; her hands were encased in a slung muff of black-dyed beaver. It was a costume perhaps a little more suggestive of some fashionable watering-place than appropriate to the staid streets of an ancient town; and

yet it was quiet enough and in good taste ; while there was in the carriage of the wearer of it a certain repose and dignity that seemed to remove from her any suspicion of trying to produce effect. For a second, as she thus came out into the daylight, she appeared undecided as to which way to turn. Her eyes—those beautiful clear gray eyes, with their black lashes—looked conscious ; and her first half-concealed glance along the dull pavements was almost apprehensive. That was but for a moment ; she had an abundance of self-command.

“And where would you like to go now, Mrs. Spink ?” she said, with much cheerfulness. “You have never been to Oxford before ? Well, the river ought to be lively just now, in view of the boat-race, you know. Shall we go down to Folly Bridge ?—and you might have a look in at Christ Church on the way.”

“But, Lady Helen,” said her companion,

with some astonishment, "I thought you had come on some errand—that you had some architectural matters to study——"

"Yes, yes," she made answer, impatiently. "But I have forgotten the book. I had a book marked. We'd better just walk about and look at the place. Oxford is always interesting; any part of it is interesting. Besides, we shall have to have lunch by-and-by. It is hardly worth while going away down to the river: who wants to see a lot of boys splashing about?"

Mrs. Spink was the most pliant of companions; she professed her readiness for anything; and so the two ladies set out, going along the High Street by the way they had come. It must be confessed, however, that Lady Helen proved herself a most indifferent cicerone. At first, it is true, she was in high spirits, and was inclined to continue that badgering of poor Mrs. Spinkie with which she had started in the morning; but gradually she became

more and more preoccupied ; while, despite all her concealment, it was clear that she was furtively glancing along the gray pavements from time to time, and that with an ever-increasing disinclination to talk. Mrs. Spink received little information. Nay, their wanderings in this direction extended no further than Queen's. Here Lady Helen turned, on some excuse or other ; and when they had repassed All Souls' and regained the region of the shops, she hung about the windows, affecting to be deeply interested in their contents. It was an odd way of studying the architectural beauties of Oxford, or of introducing a stranger to the chief features of the town. Shop windows in which were straw hats and gay neckerchiefs ; in which were clocks and watches and ornamented alarums ; in which were apples and oranges and early rhubarb—these seemed all alike capable of arresting her attention ; while she even stood and gazed, or appeared to be gazing, at a fish-

monger's slab, with its salmon and eels and cod. As the time went by in this fruitless and fatiguing fashion, she seemed to grow more taciturn and discontented; indeed, her answers to any haphazard remark her companion ventured to offer were distinctly sharp and short; and it almost seemed as if the fleeting expression of disappointment that occasionally crossed her features were about to settle down into absolute ill temper. And then again, and without a word of explanation or excuse, she set out to retrace her steps along the High Street, secretly watching, perhaps, and yet with an air as if she would defy any one—Mrs. Spink or another—to say there was any occult quest in her thoughts. She pretended to be carelessly observant of whatever she encountered—an undergraduate with his gown tucked over his arm, a butcher's boy facing a yelping terrier, a heavily laden wain lumbering along the middle of the street. But when she had

once more reached the entrance to All Souls', she hesitatingly paused at the small wooden portal, and glanced inwards at the damp green grass of the quadrangle, at the cloisterlike and crumbling walls, and the small and sombre windows.

"There is a gateway in there," she said, with a certain cold indifference, "that has a roof with fan tracery. I should like to have seen it."

"Shall we go in, then?" Mrs. Spink said at once.

"I don't know whether the chapel is open," she said—and still she lingered in a sort of sullen indecision. "If Mr. Hume—of course you remember Mr. Hume—if he were here he could tell us. Mr. Hume is a Fellow of All Souls'."

"Then let us go inside and ask for him," said Mrs. Spink, naturally enough.

But the effect produced by this casual suggestion was startling: Lady Helen's eyes flashed, and her face crimsoned.

“What do you mean?” she demanded. “Do you suppose—or would you have any one suppose—that I came to Oxford to call on Mr. Hume? That would be a pretty story to tell! We are going back to the hotel—and at once.” And not another word did this submissive attendant receive as these two returned to the Mitre; while as for Lady Helen, she seemed so vexed and angry (for some reason or another) that she appeared to have definitely abandoned that furtive scanning of distant passers-by.

On their arrival at the hotel a waiter who happened to be coming through the passage opened the door of the coffee-room for them; and Lady Helen entered, and, with never a glance around, walked straight up to the window which looks into the High Street. Her companion was less confident, or less self-absorbed.

“Don’t you think, Lady Helen,” she said, in an undertone, “that your mamma would

prefer your having lunch in a private room ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t want any lunch ! ” she made answer, impatiently—and she remained standing and looking out. “ Order what you like for yourself.”

And indeed this was not at the moment much of a public place ; there were only two other persons in the room, and these were at separate tables ; one of them a stout country-looking clergyman devoting himself to a Gorgonzola cheese, the other a young man deep in the columns of a sporting newspaper. Mrs. Spink, left to her own devices, secured a small table close by where Lady Helen was standing, and proceeded to order luncheon for two—perhaps that wilful young personage might be induced to change her mind. And Mrs. Spink saw no reason why she herself should be deprived of her mid-day meal. They had been driving for about three hours ; for well over another hour they had been

wearily pacing up and down the High Street pavements ; in her case, at all events, the vagus nerve had begun to sound its warning little bell.

But of a sudden all this was changed.

‘ Mrs. Spink ! ’ exclaimed Lady Helen, in a low and hurried voice.

The elder woman looked up. There was some one coming along outside ; and although a screen of wire gauze intervened, she easily recognised who that was ; it was Mr. Sidney Hume. But what was to be done—assuming that Lady Helen wished to intercept and speak with this son of her particular friend ? In another instant he would be past ; and she, Mrs. Spink, could not be expected to run away down the High Street of Oxford after him. But it was Lady Helen herself who proved herself mistress of this occasion. The moment she had caught sight of him she had—in her eagerness and headlong forgetfulness of strangers—rapped smartly on

the screen of wire gauze stretching across the window; but that was of no avail to attract his attention, for the screen struck the wooden frame-work, not the glass, and no sound was carried outward. Then for a second she stood irresolute, with some desperate thought of appealing to the waiter; but she now perceived that Sidney Hume was crossing the thoroughfare to talk to an elderly gentleman in cap and gown who appeared to be waiting for him at the corner of the lane. She hesitated no longer.

“Mrs. Spink,” she said, quickly, “Mr. Hume is over the way. Wouldn’t it interest Mrs. Hume to know that I had seen and spoken with her precious boy? Stay where you are. Perhaps he will come and have lunch with us.”

And therewith, and calmly and sedately, and without any appearance of haste, she left the coffee-room, emerged into the outer daylight, and watching her opportunity

between the passing cabs, crossed the thoroughfare. The elderly gentleman—when Sidney Hume saw who this was who now approached—was very speedily dismissed.

“I made sure I should meet some one I knew,” she observed to him, placidly, when he had expressed his surprise and pleasure. “I told Mrs. Spink as we were driving along this morning that I knew several lads who were at Oxford—men, I suppose they call themselves up here—though one forgets the name of their college when one isn’t interested. There is my cousin Cyril Leslie, at Brasenose; I thought I might by some accident run against him, though it would have been a matter of little consequence. But it is different meeting with you; for Mrs. Hume will be so pleased to hear that I saw you and had a chat with you. I hope you can come and have some luncheon with us over at the hotel there.”

“Oh, no, no,” he said, laughing. “I cannot afford to throw away such a chance. Mrs. Spink and you must come along and have lunch with me in my rooms; the entertainment of visitors is rather a rare joy at present—it is not to be forfeited. All Souls’ is quite close by; and I can show you the college silver while something is being got ready for you. What do you say?—will you be so kind?—shall we go over and capture Mrs. Spink?”

She was highly pleased by this friendliness; for, so far as she had observed, Sidney Hume had never shown much desire for the society of women-folk. Yet, as this tall young man piloted her across the thoroughfare, with a profound disregard of any urgent hansom; and as he brought his power of persuasion to bear on Mrs. Spink, who was glad to think of having luncheon anywhere; and as he conducted the two ladies along to All Souls’, and showed them over the college, and finally had them

installed in his own rooms, nothing could exceed his courtesy and modest kindness. She remembered a saying of Mrs. Hume's, "When you get a Scotch boy well mannered, he is very well mannered indeed." And this handsome lad, though his blood was but partly Scotch, had received his training from that Scotch mother, who was extremely proud of her name and lineage, and solicitous above all things that her sons and daughters should have a bearing worthy of their descent. As for his good looks—But here Lady Helen found herself unaccountably shy. As he moved about the room, bringing his two guests (while luncheon was being prepared for them) such small curiosities of his own as he thought might interest them—an illuminated manuscript on vellum, a Trautz-Bauzonnet binding, a rare Elzevir—her glances could only follow him in a veiled and covert fashion. She found herself, too, when he regarded her, a little disconcerted.

His eyes, grave and serious, had a curious directness in their look. They seemed to say: "Let us have done with conventionalism, with pretence. Affectation is tedious, a mere waste of time. Let us establish a simpler, a more reasonable, relationship than that." And yet, serious and attentive and respectful as his eyes were, they could lighten up at times when she was inclined to be merry; while his laugh was quite boyish. Beautiful eyes, she thought. And his hair was beautiful, so soft and smooth in its rich brown tones. As for his features, they were striking and interesting rather than strictly regular; but were they not somewhat pale for one who was fond of athletic exercises, who had taken prizes for running and high jumping; and who (according to a certain fond mamma) was one of the most distinguished members of the University Fencing Club? Of fine physique he was, most clearly; shoulders square, back flat, muscles firm and clean,

while his upright figure and the fine set of his head were such as might have been expected (as Lady Helen thought) of one of "the handsome Humes."

Mrs. Spink began to fear that luncheon would never arrive; but it did; and while the little festivity was going forward, Lady Helen took occasion to bewail her sad and solitary lot, to young Hume's intense astonishment. For he had always heard of her as living a most gay and fashionable life; and he had himself, in the autumn, met her at country houses, where she was the reigning belle; and he had seen her photograph in the shop windows as one of the leaders of the London throng. But no; it appeared that was all a mistake, a misconception.

"Mamma," said this plaintive damsel, appealing for sympathy, "never even tries to go out now, as Mrs. Spink knows to her cost; if, on rare occasions, she can be induced to go into the garden in a Bath

chair, that is about the most. As for papa, he hates the very name of London ; his sole concern is with horses and dogs, and guns and fishing-rods ; and it seems as if Providence had mysteriously arranged that if you care for nothing but hunting and fishing and shooting, you can keep yourself fully occupied from year's end to year's end. If it weren't for the good-natured charity of friends and relatives, I should forget how to find my way into the Park. What is the use of having a house in Upper Brook Street when it is let every season ? But now I have a great scheme, a splendid scheme, in my mind," she went on, with a sprightlier air. " What do you think of it, Mr. Hume ? If I were to coax papa into not letting the Upper Brook Street house for this next season, do you think Mrs. Hume would come up to town and be my guest ? I fancy it might be very pleasant for both of us—she and I are such good friends and companions ; and I would not

lead her too giddy a dance in the way of going out; while she could help me to entertain a little—the best of chaperons. What do you think of it? I am sure I can persuade papa—if only your mother will consent.”

She seemed greatly captivated by this project of hers, and talked of it all through luncheon; while he could only say that she was very kind, and that he had no doubt his mother would gladly accept. Then, luncheon over, he was for taking his guests out to show them some of the sights of Oxford, more especially as Mrs. Spink was a stranger to the town; but Lady Helen objected; she was very well where she was; she was interested in these rooms and in his occupations; she was sure he had not shown them half his treasures; had he no more of those manuscripts in gold and sumptuous colour?

Well, he was nothing loth, though he was rather given to belittling his amateur

collections and apologising for a series of useless hobbies. However, on the chance of interesting her, he went and brought a casket—a plain rosewood casket containing a series of drawers; and these drawers, on being opened, displayed a most heterogeneous assortment of last-century engraved stones and seals, coats of arms, masonic emblems, copies of antique gems, and what not, with one or two signed Pichlers. But, the better to make out these heraldic devices and minute inscriptions, she proposed he should carry the case to a small table at the window; and thither he went, she following; while Mrs. Spink, satisfied with her easy-chair and a portfolio of engravings of old Oxford, remained behind. Those two tall young people at the window had their heads pretty close together, and of necessity their fingers were continually coming in contact as each successive sard and blood-stone and agate was offered and returned.

“But what is this?” said she, on one of the drawers being opened; and she took up a small gold ornament.

“Oh, that has got in there by mistake,” he said, carelessly. “That is a copy of the little bell that Roman ladies wore as a charm against the evil eye.”

“Really! How very interesting! And the inscription?”

“The inscription is in Greek. It means ‘I was made to guard against witchcraft.’”

She seemed quite fascinated by this little gold trinket; she lingered over it; she would look at nothing else, until he said:

“If it were an original one, Lady Helen, I would ask you to accept it. But it is only a fac-simile.”

“What difference does that make?” she said, with promptitude. “Do you really give it to me?”

“If you will be so kind as to take it,” he said, in rather an off-hand way. It was not a valuable gift.

For the briefest second she thanked him with grateful eyes ; then she looked down, and said, in a low clear voice : “ Yes, I will take it—and wear it—on one condition : that you wear something I shall send you in return, as a souvenir of an unexpected meeting and a very happy hour—to me, at least.” And therewithal, before he could answer or make any promise or protest, she had gone quickly away to Mrs. Spink, and in her ordinary voice was explaining the marvellous interest attaching to this pretty charm, and declaring her resolve to wear it night and day all the years of her life as a safeguard against the machinations and evil enterprises of the powers of darkness.

And very merry, and capricious, and whimsical was she during the long drive home ; and Mrs. Spink was no longer Mrs. Spink, nor even Mrs. Spinkie, but ‘ my dear Spinkie ’ ; and she was being treated to a tolerable amount of good-humoured

raillery by this young lady with the inscrutably mischievous eyes—raillery which she bore with her accustomed patience, for, on the whole, the Monks-Hatton family were exceedingly kind to her, and she was in a dependent position, and had to be discreet.

“And don’t you think it is a noble scheme, my Spinkie,” Lady Helen continued, as they drove on by Nuneham and Dorchester and Shillingford—“a perfectly splendid scheme—to have a mother in town as well as one in the country? If I can get it to work, that is. If I can get Mrs. Hume to consent, I think I can manage papa.”

“Why, you know, Lady Helen, you always have your own way in everything, and with everybody,” said Mrs. Spink.

“Oh! oh! what is that?” the younger lady retorted. “More tyranny? More turning of the worm? I should not be at all surprised, my dear but dark Mrs. Spinkie, that you were in secret league with the

Nihilists. Some day or other we shall find a bomb on the front steps at Monks-Hatton, and that will be having it out with us with a vengeance! And isn't it another piece of monstrous cruelty that I should be going up to all the gaieties of town while you are left to mope and pine in the country?"

"I am sure of this, Lady Helen," Mrs. Spink interposed, with some little spirit, "that no one is to be pitied who is allowed to spend the summer at Henley."

"Oh, if you take it that way," the younger lady said. "Drooping laburnums—and honeysuckle—and wild roses in the hedges. All very nice. For my part, I prefer the flowers you find on the side of a great staircase, when you are going up, and when you are listening to the music above. Or in a conservatory, if you are sitting out a dance. Or at the Botanic Society's Fêtes. Oh yes, the Botanic Society's Fêtes are delightful. But about the great project, my dear Spinkie. Don't you think Mrs.

Hume will make an admirable chaperon? You see, her own family have all married into the very best sets. No wonder. The handsome Hays and the handsome Humes. Don't you think they have a name and a history just as proud as any? Have you ever heard the prophecy,

‘Whate’er hath end, whate’er begins,
There’ll aye be Hays while Teviot rins’?

That was Thomas the Rhymer in the thirteenth century. I'm afraid he was a wicked old gentleman, and in league with the devil; but I can repeat any witchcraft verses with impunity, so long as I am wearing the talisman that is to protect me from all possible harm. Come, now, my dear Spinkie, wake up, and tell me if you can imagine a more distinguished figure than Mrs. Hume will present at the head of the table in Upper Brook Street. The head? Why, of course. I am going to pretend to be a young woman for a year or two longer. Other folks can be as dark

and silent as yourself, you know, when there is occasion. And one's age is not a matter that concerns anybody except one's enemies."

But when they were nearing Henley, Lady Helen's mood changed somewhat.

"You must explain to mamma, Mrs. Spink," said she, "how we came to run against Mr. Hume—the most unexpected thing that could have happened. Of course it was very lucky, for I particularly wanted to see that vaulted roof, and the reredos in the chapel. But if we drive there again I will take care not to forget the book that I have marked."

Mrs. Spink—or Spinkie—did not answer : she was an observant woman, but not communicative.

CHAPTER IV.

A VISITOR.

NAN SUMMERS and her father were seated at the breakfast table. And a very pretty breakfast table it was; everything bright and fresh and clear, with bowls and glasses of wall-flower and daffodils and jonquils, placed there by the youthful house-mistress herself. The sunlight, unchecked by any complicity of curtains, fell on the white cloth, and shed a soft glory around that lit up the wild-rose tints of her happy young face and shone in her smiling and contented eyes.

“Nan,” said her father, “I found another thrush’s nest for you this morning; but I don’t know how many eggs, for she

sat still, looking at me, and so I came away."

"Ah, Dodo," said Nan, "that reminds me. I have been hearing about you and your frightful extravagance. Old John has told me. Now I understand why there are so many singing-birds about this place, piping away from the earliest hour in the morning. I have heard of the chopped meat, and the marrow-bones, and crumbs, and half-loaves scattered about every time you came here while the house was being got ready."

"Well, you see, Nan," said he, with some air of apology, "I knew you did not like the idea of caged birds. I heard you say so once. And I thought I might coax the wild ones to come about, so that they would nest here; and a few scraps don't run to much. But I think you ought to have some pets in-doors, Nan. I must see about that; companions for you, to keep you amused. What do you say to a King

Charles spaniel, now? And I know where I can get you a Russian cat—a splendid fellow, like a young bear. And what about some tame rabbits? or guinea-pigs?”

“There’s one thing I wonder you haven’t got for me, Dodo,” said she, “considering all the care you take of me—as if I were worth it. I wonder you haven’t got a bull-dog to watch outside the house at night.”

He looked up. “A bull-dog?” he said, quietly. “I am going to be your bull-dog, Nan. I rather like the job. Many’s the time, when I was down at Bristol, I walked over to the vicarage after you were all asleep; and I used to think, ‘Well, now, if any enterprising cracksman has it in his mind to break into this house and frighten Nan, I wish he’d just happen to choose this particular night for it.’”

She burst out laughing. “Oh, what a shame! The poor man—the poor wretch trying to earn a dishonest living—and all of a sudden he thinks the Evil One has got

him by the throat. Do you consider that playing fair, Dodo ? ”

“ I think you may trust to me to be your bull-dog, Nan,” he said, in the same quiet way. And then he added, “ Well, now, if you have finished, you’d better put on your hat and jacket, and bring me my pipe, and we’ll go out and see how old John is getting on with his pansy beds.”

But when she rejoined him in the garden she found that he had not gone near old John ; he was by himself, slowly pacing up and down one of the paths, his head bent, his face grave.

“ There’s something I have put off telling you, Nan,” said he, rather uneasily. “ The fact is, we are going to have a visitor this afternoon.”

“ Yes ? ” said she, with cheerful promptitude.

“ I would rather have avoided it if I could well have done so,” he continued. “ You see, it’s this way, Nan : I want you

to have a fair and clear start. I would rather you did not meet any of my former acquaintances——”

“But why, Dodo?” said she. “If they were good enough for you to know, they are good enough for me.”

“It’s different; it’s different; you don’t understand,” he answered her, almost impatiently. “I want you to have a fair and clear start. I want you to make your own friends and acquaintances.”

“But I don’t want any friends and acquaintances,” she exclaimed. “I can’t be bothered with them. I am too much occupied, and too happy, all day long. Why, when I drive in to Henley in the morning, I get my shopping over just in time to bring you back for lunch. And then in the afternoon I have to help old John with his seeds and labels—his petunias, and lobelias, and centaureas, and so on. And as for the evening, do you think I want any stranger to come in while you are

having your pipe and I am reading to you before the fire? That is a very likely thing ! ”

“ Ah, but inevitably you will form friends and acquaintances, Nan,” he said to her. “ You cannot help it ; and you need not seek to help it ; all I say is, they must be of your own choosing, and your own ways of thinking and upbringing. As for myself, I don’t want to play the part of mystery man. I don’t want to conceal what I have been——”

“ I should think not ! ” she exclaimed again.

“ But there is no use in flaunting things in people’s faces, and challenging prejudices,” he continued, in a very reasonable tone. “ If I want the past to be the past, it is for your sake, Nan. I want you to start fair and clear. And I want you to remember this, too—it is but natural for people to have prejudices ; and they don’t reflect that a human being cannot always

be what he would like to be. It is very easy to say, ‘Oh, how shocking of you to have earned your living in such a way, and in such company!’ but they forget that perhaps you never had any other chance. And so, if any one should ever say anything against me to you, Nan——”

“Anything — against — you — to me?” she interposed, with a proud trembling of the lips. “I think the answer would be ready!”

“Ah, but, as I say, people have their prejudices,” he remonstrated with her, gently. “And that is what I would ask you to remember—that perhaps one might have chosen another way of life if one had had the chance. But the great bulk of us are born poor; and we have to accept the circumstances and the companions we find around us; and we have to earn our bread by any means that is handy——”

“In order to throw it away on thrushes and linnets!” she said, laughing. She

would have no more of these excuses and palliations. She was of a robust faith. "Tell me, Dodo," she went on, abruptly changing the subject, "who is your visitor who is coming this afternoon?"

"He is a good enough sort of young fellow—in his own way, that is," he answered her; "though your friends at the vicarage might consider him just a little bit—a little bit—— But I don't know. He is good-natured—amiable—a jovial kind of a chap. Oh, I've seen Dick Erridge get on very well with strangers. He is the son of the people who have the Golden Swan Hotel at Richmond; and very well off they are; but he doesn't squander—not a bit; he's shrewd; gets value for his money; he can look after himself. Really, he's not at all a bad sort of young fellow, if you make allowances——"

"Will he stay to dinner?" asked the practical young house-mistress.

"No, no," he replied at once. "He will

not trouble you, Nan; he must not be allowed to trouble you. Indeed, I did not want him to come at all; but I could not very well shake him off; and—and if you don't mind being just a little bit civil to him—after all, he's a good-natured sort of chap——”

“If I don't mind being civil to him?” she repeated. “To the first friend of yours who has taken the trouble to come and call on you in your new home? Well, we'll see about that!”

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon that the front gate was thrown open by a groom, and presently a very tall dog-cart, drawn by two chestnut cobs tandem, was carefully piloted along the semicircular drive until it was drawn up at the door of the house. The young man who now descended from this lofty vehicle was not himself of an imposing appearance, except, perhaps, as to his costume, which was of an extremely horsey character; he wore a

large and loose buff-coloured overcoat with big horn buttons ; while his rigid collar, his elaborate tie, and his resplendently polished and pointed boots were worthy of attention. And yet this Dick Erridge was not all clothes. He had something to say for himself ; nay, as he followed Mr. Summers into the little drawing-room, he showed a chirpy, jerky self-possession not to be despised ; and when he was introduced to Miss Anne, he greeted her with a quick, decisive bow.

“ Glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Summers,” he said. “ I have seen your photograph more than once ; but there are some people the photographer never does justice to—not to be expected.”

He was a short, dumpy little man, with a clean-shaven face, and with an odd irregularity of expression about his mouth that might have given him a chance of becoming a comic actor ; his eyes alert and intelligent enough ; his look distinctly good-humoured ; while, as speedily ap-

peared, in spite of his tricks and airs of assurance and self-assertion, his attitude towards Mr. Summers was one of slavish worship. That was what Nan wanted to learn, first of all. When she heard the stranger arrive, she had said in her heart, "Now show me how you treat my father, and then I shall know how to treat you." But this dapper little person, notwithstanding his nonchalance and cheerful effrontery, seemed absolutely to grovel before her father, so excessive was his admiration. She said, inwardly, "You're not very good to look at, and you're overdressed, and you needn't keep your elbows stuck out in that way, but you must stay to dinner."

"You haven't driven all the way from Richmond this morning?" Mr. Summers asked of his guest.

"Oh dear no," answered the gentleman in the wide coat and the tight gaiters and the painfully pointed boots. "I stopped

last night at Slough, with some bachelor friends." He grinned in grateful remembrance. "They did me well, I assure you—uncommon well: Bollinger of '84; green chartreuse fit for a prince; Bock's gold-foil cigars; and Nap. till two o'clock this morning: all very fine and large."

"Would you like some tea, Mr. Erridge?" said the young hostess.

"No, thanks," he responded, in his blithe and off-hand way. "I've only come to have a look over the new diggins; and then I'm o-u-g-h, off. Sha'n't disturb you. But I've brought you a little present, Mr. Summers, that I think will be of use to you. If you don't mind, I'll go and see if my man has fetched it in; and if you could get me a brad-awl and a screw-driver, I'll show you how to work the oracle. We can fix it up in the twinkling of a bedpost."

Nan was left alone in the room. Then she began to hear strange noises in the hall—the prising open of wood, the clank-

ing of metal, and so on; and presently these noises retreated to the passage leading through to the back premises. By-and-by her curiosity overcame her; she went out to see what was going on; and then she found that Mr. Dick Erridge and his groom had between them succeeded in fixing up against the wall a tall and narrow piece of mechanism, apparently in steel and bronze, with cords, pulleys, handles, and weights. Mr. Summers was standing by, with an odd, half-ashamed, deprecatory look on his face.

“What’s the good, man, what’s the good?” he was saying.

But Dick Erridge was seriously in earnest; and the moment he saw Nan approach he appealed to her for assistance.

“Look here, Miss Summers,” he cried; “I want you to come and help me to convince your father. I say it is a shame that any one should have such splendid strength, and not keep himself well up to

the mark. And here is the very thing—quite handy—no labour—a few minutes now and again——”

By this time Nan had drawn near. “What is it, then?” she asked, regarding this upright instrument.

“Oh, they call it a chest-expander, or a chest-machine; but that’s all bosh, for it exercises all the muscles of the body, though no doubt the chest and arms in greater measure. And I say your father should keep himself in good fettle——”

“My father must not take any violent exercise,” said Nan Summers, gravely.

“Violent?” said the young man, almost vehemently. “There is no violence! That is the beauty of it; there is no wrenching, as with Indian clubs or dumb-bells. And you can have just what weight to pull against that you like; you can have the exercise as gentle as ever you please. See here!”

In the zeal of his proselytism he pulled

off his overcoat and threw it to his man; he stooped down and removed some of the weights; he got up, took hold of the two handles, stepped back a space, and began vigorously to box the air between him and the wall, while the weights slid easily up and down the metal grooves. Then he turned his back to the wall, and again pounded the air in front of him, and shot out his arms sideways, and hauled at the ropes from over his head, and jerked them out from his elbows, and went through all kinds of diverse movements, until he suddenly released the handles, which went rattling back to the machine.

“Do you see that, now?—work for a child!” he exclaimed, though he was himself puffing and blowing, and laboriously trying to conceal the same.

“But what’s the object?” Nan’s father said, with a good-natured smile. “What’s the use of going into training for no end?”

“For no end?” Dick Erridge repeated,

indignantly. "I say that a man with a splendid build like yours, with such splendid strength, should keep it up for its own sake. You should be proud of it for its own sake. It is a possession, a wonderful possession. What a fine thing it must be to go about with the consciousness that you are the master, that you have the power, that you can always get elbow-room for yourself in a crowd, and that if there's a row raised you can make it kingdom come for any rough who is juggins enough to bump up against you! Is that nothing? There are some men think a heap of a pot o' money; and there's others think no end of a lump of land; but for my part I'd as lief have something I could carry about with me—something a part of myself—something that would enable me to hold my own if there was need. It's *nemo me*—*nemo me imp*—ah, well. I tell you this, Miss Summers," he continued, and in his eagerness and enthusiasm he left the Latin

phrase behind: it was really a beautiful eagerness and enthusiasm—in Homeric times it would have soared and found expression in long-rolling hexameters. “If your father had any ambition that way, and if he went into training for it, I believe he could claim to be the strongest man in England—apart from the professionals at the halls, of course, and they’re only one or two. Why,” said he, and he went forward and gripped Mr. Summers between the elbow and shoulder, “there’s muscle for you! There’s an arm! I shouldn’t like to be the Johnny that got that sledge-hammer on to the top of his little cocoanut. And yet I’ll be bound he never practises with anything. I’ll take my davy there isn’t a dumb-bell in the house——”

Nan’s father moved away, with a bit of a quiet laugh. “My good fellow,” he said, “I don’t want to send any of my fellow-creatures to kingdom come, even if I were able.” And then he turned to Nan.

“What do you say, Nan? Shall we show Mr. Erridge round the garden now? Run away and put something about your head, and then you can come out and tell him all the fine things we are looking forward to.”

Now when Nan went quickly away to fetch her hat, her first hasty impressions of this stranger were of a distinctly mixed character. In respect of his profound and declared admiration of her father (she might have said) she liked him well; but in respect of himself he was naught. And she might have added, in the phraseology of the philosopher, that in respect of his disposition, it appeared to be a very good and amiable disposition, but in respect of his manner, 'twas a very vile manner. It certainly was not the manner of the folk whom she had been accustomed to meet at the vicarage. Even his accent seemed alien and strange. But everything was outweighed by this attitude of his towards

her father. In the brief time that she was absent she had resolved to be as civil and kind to this visitor as she knew how to be. She would think only of his good points, and shut her eyes to others that did not quite so commend themselves. Was not this the first of her father's friends who had taken the trouble to come and see him?

When she went out again she found the two of them in confabulation with the old Scotch gardener, who was discoursing learnedly about early pease, asparagus beds, and what not; and she waited, listening to the universal calling and trilling of the blackbirds and thrushes and linnets, and to the more distant kurrooing of the wood-pigeons from among the lofty beeches, that were now gathering about them the silence of the evening and a premonition of the dusk. But presently she interposed, and said,

“ Mr. Erridge, you can't be driving back to Richmond to-night? ”

“Oh, not at all,” said he. “Only down to Henley—the Red Lion—they treat me well there. I feel like a lord when I have the corner sitting-room, with the Charles I. coat of arms in it, all to myself.”

“But won’t you stay and dine with us?” she made bold to say, to her father’s astonishment. “You won’t find it dark to-night driving in to Henley. There will be moonlight—nearly a full moon—and once you have made your way down to the Oxford road, it will be all quite clear and simple.”

“I shall be most happy,” he answered, with gallant promptitude. “Suit me to a turn, if I’m not putting you out in any way.”

“It may be only a chop, or something of that kind, you know, Dick,” Mr. Summers said, intervening to save Nan from any responsibility or danger of failure. “We’re hardly settled down here yet. But you won’t mind.”

“The best of everything is good enough for me,” said the young man, with airy confidence. “And the best of everything is a chop with an old friend.”

And therewithal Nan sped swiftly away, to hold earnest converse with the cook. It was a rash experiment, perhaps; and this was the first of her father’s friends who had come to the house. But the young man looked amiable and tolerant; and, besides, she had a kind of notion that whatever happened, and in whatever chance fashion he was treated, the sitting at her father’s table would be for him quite a sufficient pleasure and honour and glory.

And, as it turned out, the little dinner was in every way successful, no matter what anxious fears may have possessed the mind of the young hostess; and her father seemed gratified; while, as for their visitor, happy in his self-importance, delighted with his company, and perhaps a little desirous of impressing this remark-

ably pretty girl, he fairly excelled himself in displays of wit and humour—of their kind. Only once he blundered.

“Of course you will drive over to the Windsor meeting?” he asked, in his gay way, of Nan’s father.

“No, no,” Mr. Summers said, shortly.

Indeed, Nan had noticed that whenever races or horses were mentioned, her father had made haste to change the subject, and that with something of ill temper.

“Oh, I quite understand that you have retired from active business,” the garrulous young man proceeded. “I quite understand that. And no one more pleased than myself that you were able to take such a step—no one more ready to congratulate you. But I thought you might be driving over to the Windsor meeting merely to see some of the lads.”

“Why not, father?” Nan interposed, boldly.

The frown on his face deepened, but he

would not speak roughly to her. He only repeated a curt "No, no!" and would have turned the talk to something else. But Dick Erridge had already resumed.

"At all events," said he, in his evident desire to please his smiling-eyed young hostess—"at all events, you will take Miss Summers to Sandown for the Grand Military? You must, really. Think of the paddock, rank and fashion, youth and beauty, the pick o' the swell mob—the very thing to interest her."

The dark look on Mr. Summers's face had still further deepened; and yet, impatient and angry as he was, he kept a firm hold over himself.

"I want my daughter," he said, in slow and measured tones, "to form her own circle of friends and acquaintances. And she is not going to begin by attending race-meetings."

The young man instantly perceived that he had blundered. And he was quick and

ingenious; in about a minute he had the conversation miles away from Sandown and steeple-chases and all therewith connected. And Nan, who had but rarely beheld that sombre and threatening expression on her father's face, was glad to see it disappear; indeed, her mere presence, with the radiant sunniness of her look, was quite sufficient to dispel it. Soon those three were on the easiest of terms again; and the evening passed quickly by—all too quickly for the guest, as could be gathered from the evident reluctance with which he rose to bid them adieu.

“I must not keep you up too late, or you'll never ask me back again,” said he, in his chirpy way, as he went to fetch his coat. “And Miss Summers must not spoil those country roses in her cheeks, though, indeed, she's not likely to lose them up among these woods. And I'm going to look you up again some day soon, if you will let me.”

The moonlight fell clear and cold on the semicircular path, on the white gate, and on the rhododendron bushes, that threw shadows of intensest blackness on the lawn. The bird world was hushed now. And here was the tall dog-cart, the unnecessary lamps lit, the groom at the leader's head. Jim Summers (as he was generally called by his associates — his former associates) and Nan came to the door to bid their visitor good-bye.

“The most charming evening I ever spent in my life,” observed the gay young man, as he got up and possessed himself of the reins. “Awf’ly good of you to take me in and do for me in that hospitable way. Ta, ta! I think on this occasion I will let Jakes walk by the leader’s head until we get down into the Henley road.

‘For though on pleasure he was bent,
He had a frugal mind.’

Good-bye, Miss Summers! Hope I haven’t

bored you to death. I will promise never to do so no more."

And thereupon the two horses, with the groom leading, walked slowly along the drive, the black cortége on the dully silvered road having rather a funereal appearance. Mr. Summers followed to shut the gate; there was a final farewell called from amongst the darkness of the trees; and then Nan's father came back to her. She did not want to go in just yet, the night was so clear and beautiful. She put her hand within his arm; she would have him go for a little stroll up and down in the perfect and welcome silence.

"Now, Dodo, I'm going to talk seriously to you——" she began, when he interrupted her.

"But first of all, Nan," said he, in rather a timid fashion, "I wish you would tell me what you think of him—of Dick Erridge, you know."

And then she made answer bravely,

though perhaps with a little qualm of conscience: "Oh, he is well enough; I like him very well indeed. I was quite glad to have a friend of yours call on you, particularly a friend who seems to have such a warm and honest admiration of you as he has. You must ask him again; I hope he will come often. And on his side I think he appeared to enjoy the evening: didn't you think so too, Dodo?"

He seemed a little relieved; yet he went on, with some touch of anxiety: "He is really a good fellow, is Dick. And that slang of his is all affectation; it is done to amuse you; the least hint—from one like you, Nan—would stop it in a moment. Perhaps he is a trifle blunt and off-hand—it's a way some of the young fellows have—there's not much harm in it. Oh yes, a very good chap is Dick—only—only I was afraid he mightn't be quite your sort, Nan."

"The world is made up of all sorts!"

she exclaimed. "And that is just what I was coming to, Dodo. Why should you keep away from any companions of yours on my account? Do you think I consider myself such a superior person? Why shouldn't you bring your old friends and acquaintances here? Why shouldn't you go to the Windsor meeting or to Sandown? I will go with you, if you like; I never saw a horse-race; why shouldn't I see one—and be introduced to any of your friends you might meet? I am so afraid, Dodo, you will find this place dull. It cannot be dull for me so long as you are here, for I have plenty to do, and I am happy all the day long. But for you? And why should you consider me as something to be taken such care of? Why draw such a line? Don't you know that the great saints of the world were never respecters of persons—that they saw the good in every kind of humanity—that the beggar by the way-side was as much to them as the king on the throne?

Don't make me out a superior person, Dodo! You must get all your old acquaintances to come here, just as Mr. Erridge has done, and if they have the same opinion of you that he has, then they sha'n't want for a welcome—from me, at least!"

He patted her hand that lay on his arm. "No, no, Nan," said he, in a kindly way. "You must begin your own life with everything fair and clear before you. I have not been planning and waiting all these years for nothing. But you need not think that I don't understand you. I understand you very well. There's a great deal of human nature about you, Nan, and a great deal of charity. Yes, as there had need to be, Nan—a great deal of charity and forbearance, when you gave up your friends at the vicarage, and all their pretty and elegant ways, and came to live here with a rough and ignorant fellow like Jim Summers."

She was silent for a little while; and

presently, as he chanced to look, he found, to his dismay, that she was covertly crying.

“You don’t intend it, Dodo, but sometimes you are very cruel to me,” she said. And it was a long time before she could be pacified, out here in the white moonlight.

CHAPTER V.

A SQUIRE OF DAMES.

THE following letter was one morning received by a certain Fellow of All Souls' :

“ Lilac Lodge, Henley.

“ MY DEAR SID,

“ Truly marvels will never cease. You meet a young and pretty woman, and instead of contemptuously turning aside from her and escaping into the groves of Academe, where those elderly Greek gentlemen talk and talk for ever and ever, you actually condescend to be civil to her, and insist on her becoming your guest, and send her home entranced with the way in which she has been entertained and amused. I have just heard all the story. And the


Roman charm, too; it was such a pretty idea of yours to give her that; she went up to London the next day, and has had the most cunning little chain and clasp attached. And do you know what she has got for you?—*she* won't expatiate on its value, of course, but you will understand—no one better; and I wonder which of the young men about town wouldn't give the tips of his ears to receive a keepsake from Helen Yorke. It is an ancient Greek ring, in the original setting, with the most beautifully engraved head of Hera, in onyx. It was found in the island of Santa Maura about three years ago; and I believe the British Museum people were after it; but they *swithered* about the price; and the museum that swithers is lost. Pfander, of New Bond Street bought it, and indeed had kept it for himself, only Helen seems to have persuaded him to give it up. She generally gets what she wants; it's a way the dear girl has. But seriously, my dear

Sidney, I wish I could see in this pretty little exchange of gifts some indication of something of greater moment—some indication that her erratic fancy showed signs of settling at last. I fear, however, there is no such piece of good fortune in store for you (supposing you to be inclined that way). I foresee what will happen. After having refused I don't know how many offers—out of mere caprice and perversity, I believe—she will end by marrying that wretched Captain Erle, simply because he's always hanging about after her. Of course it's a good enough match, for it is next door to a certainty now that he will succeed to the Kinross title and estates—unless he should providentially break his neck in the mean time in one of those steeplechases of his; but if in the end Helen should marry him, I shall be sorry to part with her, for she is really the dearest creature when you have got to understand her ways.

“And now I come to the main purport

of my letter. Helen is anxious to spend this next season in London; but not with relatives or friends; she would rather occupy that house in Upper Brook Street that they have been in the habit of letting since Lady Monks-Hatton became so much of an invalid. And her father has consented—he always does consent to anything she wants, so long as he is left free to follow his own diversions; and her proposal is that I should go and spend the season with her as her guest and her chaperon. Well, I am not unwilling. I think I should like it, for Helen and I get on capitally together. But then, you see, we must have a man to look after us and squire us about; and that man, if I have anything to say to it, shall *not* be Captain Erle. I hate the very sight of him. He is too self-satisfied; too sure of Helen, you might almost imagine; I don't like gentlemen who have an air of throwing the handkerchief. Now, Sidney, when are you going to tear yourself away from your be-

loved college? Why shouldn't you give up your rooms at Easter for good, have your books and things sent here, and come up to town? A single bedroom at Strong's Hotel in Bond Street would be all you could want, and that would be but a few minutes' walk for you, no matter how late we three might care to sit up, after a theatre or a dinner or a dance. Come and see the world you live in. It is full of colour and gaiety and activity; it isn't a pale and silent thing, like literature—a cold copy of the life led by other people ever so long ago. If you must have books, what ails you at the London Library? But I can imagine many a snug and merry little party—the three of us—sitting up after the whirl of the evening has been got over, to discuss all the people and lay plans for the next day; very snug and nice; and it is *not* Captain Erle whom I propose to have as the third person of that little group. At the same time, consult your own wishes; only let me know,



for if you would rather decline, then I should refuse Helen's invitation, and remain at Henley.

“ Good-night, my dear boy. Philip and Jean are urging me to pay them a visit, but I must see what you have to say first.

“ YOUR AFFECTIONATE MOTHER.

“ P.S.—Helen expects you to *wear* this ring; and it will do very well as a scarf-pin if you get some squeezable material like China crape; a light terra-cotta would look nice.”

It was a skilful letter, and eventually it achieved its object; for, indeed, the young man was at all times an obedient son, and easily influenced by a mother of whom he was exceedingly fond and proud. Perhaps it was with a sigh that he gave up his cherished rooms, and had his belongings transferred to Henley; and perhaps it was with no eager anticipation that he proceeded to London to become a squire of dames.

But there were compensations ; and among these were certainly the snug little gatherings which Mrs. Hume managed to secure when the toil of pleasure had ceased for the evening, and silence had come down over the fashionable world, and when those three, with all their responsibilities thrown aside, could sit idly and merrily talk over the events of the day, until, on occasion, especially as the spring drew on to early summer, it might be a pale gray-blue light appearing through the curtains that would tell this young man it was time for him to seek his overcoat and get home to Bond Street. He accompanied them everywhere—garden parties, flower shows, private views, military tournaments, concerts, theatres, dinners, dances ; he was included in all invitations as a matter of course ; and if ill-natured people laughed and said that Lady Helen was rather too openly qualifying for the post of daughter-in-law, these remarks did not reach the ears of the tall and stately

lady who acted as her chaperon with so much tact and shrewdness and good humour. Those three, always arriving together and always leaving together, came to be looked on as a family group. No two young people ever had such opportunities of studying each other's nature and disposition. And then again the house in Upper Brook Street was quite close to Hyde Park : looking slantwise from the drawing-room windows, you could see the trees, and the long swaths of green, and the carriages driving by ; and sometimes, when Sidney called in the morning (for orders, as it were), Mrs. Hume would be busy, or would affect to be busy, and would send the two children, as she occasionally called them, for a stroll in the Park, where they could amuse themselves by admiring the flower-plots—the crimson and golden-yellow tulips, the beds of pansies, the borders of none-so-pretty—and by chatting and talking to each other, and scrutinising the people in the carriages, until they

considered it time for the elder lady to be ready. It was a perfumed, artificial sort of life, perhaps. Sidney, absently lounging about the drawing-room, and looking at the masses of geraniums and cythus and marguerites in the balconies outside the three windows, might have said in his heart he would rather have had the sight of a lush meadow yellowed with buttercups ; but one cannot have everything ; and London is really very pretty towards the end of May, especially when the trees in the parks are stirred with a west wind, and there is a universal shivering and glancing of leaves in the pallid sunlight, rendered the more effective by the gathering gloom of some banked-up purple clouds.

Yet not always and at every hour and moment was he thus their bounden slave. He claimed and exercised a certain liberty ; he would run across to the Oval for some cricket match ; he would look in at the tennis-court at Lord's ; and he was most

assiduous in keeping up his fencing. But his favourite resort during an unoccupied half-hour was the British Museum; and it was not the books and gems that drew him thither, but rather the sculpture rooms—those silent and lone-echoing halls, where the solitary stranger may dream dreams. This poor, forlorn, abducted Caryatid, for example, broken-nosed, begrimed, deserted—is she thinking of her five radiant sisters, far away on the lofty height, looking across the wide valleys to the gray-green slopes of Hymettus murmuring of its bees? Then those various voiceless fragments of busts and limbs: when they were compact and alive, in the distant times, surely they must have listened to the laughter of Greek maidens by the Fountain of Callirrhoe, down there in the plain, where the Ilissus trickles along its arid channel, or sweeps in storm-flood, tawny and turbulent, through the sparse olive groves. Nay, this young fellow standing here—who

might himself have been taken for a Greek youth of the great days—he had some little bit of imagination too. When the sunlight fell from the roof and lay in broad squares on the floor, it was easy to forget the great outside world of London; it was easy to summon up another vision—the steep white steps of the Propylæa—the wide country stretching down to Phalerum—the long curve of Salamis—the blue waters of the Gulf of Ægina basking in the heat. He was sorry for this poor forlorn Caryatid. The bees on Mount Hymettus would be murmuring now.

He was more familiar, less reverential, with the Romans—with the portrait busts. He would stand before them and ask them questions; would try to discover what they had been really like—what they had done and thought. Here was the large-eyed, mild-featured Marcus Aurelius. ‘Tell me, now,’ he would say to those blank eyes, ‘was your philosophy living and actual and

a part of yourself, or were you only playing with phrases to console yourself a little, or to keep up your courage, or perhaps merely to display your wisdom? Could you really hold yourself so superior to all the buffets of chance and the opinion of your fellow-creatures? Is it true that you could so serenely contemplate being swallowed up in the universal substance, following Chrysippus and Socrates and Epictetus into the unknown? Impervious to any dint of fortune you professed to be; yet they say you betrayed violent grief when Faustina died. Was that quite consistent? But perhaps you forgot the philosopher and revealed the man?’

Lady Helen’s courtship of this beautiful youth, however subtly planned and skilfully carried out (with varying moods and petulances), was not progressing very satisfactorily. He was always most polite and kind to her, even as he was always obedient to the imperiously good-natured mamma;

but he did not make much of her favours ; and he did not seek for any secrets, nor endeavour to monopolize her society when they were at any ball or party together. What seems still more inhuman and incredible, he did not even sympathise with her piteous attempts at learning Greek ; and when at last, worn out with dialects and dual numbers and dots, she yielded to a fit of temper and flung dictionary and grammar and all the rest from her on to the table, and declared she would have done with the whole thing, he merely gathered the volumes together, and said, with a laugh, that she was very wise, seeing that so many excellent “ cribs ” were being issued from day to day. Nevertheless, in a pathetic kind of fashion, she did what she could to associate herself with his favourite studies and pursuits. She was an eager admirer of Greek intaglios and cameos ; she professed sympathy with the ladies who are or used to be desirous of introducing Greek

costume—though she herself did not propose to walk along Oxford Street in *chiton* and *chlaina*; Minerva became for her Athene; and Zeus, not Jupiter, ruled over the gods; while she was profoundly interested in certain historical projects of which Sidney had rather indifferently told her—projects that promised to lead him away into personal exploration of the

“ Chersonese,
Where the thundering Bosphorus answers the thunder
of Pontic seas.”

She half intimated that she also would like to visit those legendary shores, under the kind guardianship that had now been established. For this Upper Brook Street experiment had worked admirably well: why should it cease with the autumn dispersal? And Mrs. Hume seemed not unwilling to continue at her not very onerous post. Perhaps the elder lady may have considered that the whole situation would have been rendered more explicit by the

introduction of a wedding-ring; but she was too shrewd to press matters. For this son of hers, with all his filial obedience, had a sort of sensitive personal pride. She limited herself to an occasional hint, apparently of the most haphazard kind; and meanwhile, the longer this arrangement existed, the more natural did it appear to be. Why should these three separate, either now, or at the end of the season, or at any time?

“Ah, Helen,” said Mrs. Hume one morning, before Mr. Sidney had made his appearance, “you might make me a very happy woman if you chose.”

For she affected to believe that it was the young lady who was coy.

Lady Helen laughed, and coloured a little.

“I know what you mean, dear Mrs. Hume,” said she. “I don’t pretend not to know what you mean. But that is about the last thing likely to happen in this

world. Oh, there are fifty reasons against it—a hundred ! For one thing, our interests are so different ; he is taken up with his historical schemes, and I with the frivolities of this town. And then another very excellent reason is that he doesn't like me—— ”

“ Helen, how can you say so ? ” the elder woman remonstrated, warmly. “ He is devoted to you—I never saw such constant attention and kindness—— ”

“ No, no, no ! ” the other said, with wilful insistence. “ I understand him well. There is only one thing he tolerates about me, and that is my name. He addresses me by name, but he is thinking of another Helen—the Helen who came to ‘ Ilion's towers.’ That was somebody worth thinking about, somebody of importance. But as for the actual women he meets—the vain, frivolous, ignorant, vacillating creatures—I know he holds us all in contempt—— ”

“ Helen, how entirely, how provokingly

mistaken you are ! ” Mrs. Hume exclaimed again.

“ Oh, I know, I know,” her companion persisted. “ I can see it in his eyes. They are the most extraordinary eyes ! They look right through you. There’s no hiding from them. They seem to command you to be honest ; and, you know, that isn’t always convenient ; honesty is very well—but you may have too much of it. And then his marvellous quickness ! He sees what you are going to say before you have half got it said ; and then I am haunted by the terror that he will turn away, to let you know it wasn’t worth saying—— ”

“ Really, Helen, you don’t pay me any compliment about Sidney’s upbringing—if he can be guilty of such rudeness—— ”

“ Rudeness ? ” the younger woman broke in. “ Nothing of the kind ! He does not take the trouble to be rude. But you feel conscious of such a terrible standard of honesty. No pretty little bit of hypocrisy

and make-believe: say what you've got to say, madam, and don't give yourself airs and graces! Why, we were looking over the Marmor Homericum—you know—the Baron de Triquetis—and we came to the head of Aphrodite—the smiling one, with the mirror—and I said, 'No wonder she smiles when she looks in the mirror.' Well, he never uttered a word. And I knew what he was thinking; I knew perfectly; he was inwardly saying, 'If you wish for a compliment, you must make the invitation a little less coarse and obvious.' No, he remained absolutely silent; as hard as iron; brutally stiff, I call it; for, after all, human nature wants a little give and take. Other people have mirrors, besides Aphrodite among her dolphins——"

By this time Mrs. Hume was inclined to smile.

"I don't know what strange fancies you have got into your head, Helen," she observed at length, "but clearly it is not

owing to anything Sidney has said or done. Why should you imagine such things about him?—for it is all your own imagination. If he has been accidentally silent on some occasion——”

“Oh, he is a great deal too perfect,” Lady Helen said, with angry impatience, “and he expects every one else to be the same.”

And here Mrs. Hume did actually break into laughter.

“Poor lad!” said she. “I had always thought that his chief failing was an excessive modesty. But mothers are blind creatures.”

With all her other engagements Lady Helen was at this time having her portrait painted by Mr. Mellord, the great Academician; and the days on which she gave him sittings Mrs. Hume devoted to her own immediate relatives; for several of her married sons and daughters had come to town, and there was a good deal of visiting

to be done within the wide family circle. Lady Helen went off alone, accompanied only by her maid Willis, who was quite content to sit for hours in the spacious hall of white and black marble, looking at the plashing fountain, and the alabaster swan, and the flowers, with the occasional distraction of the appearance of a visitor. It is true, Lady Helen had hinted to Sidney Hume that if he would come and talk to her in the studio, the famous Academician would not only not object, but would really welcome him, for it would allow him to give all his time to his painting and his pipe. But Sidney did not respond to this invitation. The "History of the Scythians," for example, demanded wide research. Lady Helen went alone with her maid.

Now on the evening of one of those sitting days she returned with a certain air of triumph; though it was always difficult to tell, from her mysteriously reticent eyes, what her real mood was. The three of

them sat down to an early dinner, or to an apology for a dinner, for they were going to the Haymarket Theatre later on; and hardly had Lady Helen's guests taken their places, when it became evident that she had recently encountered some unusual experience.

"Yes, indeed," she said, with animation, "I have had some little amusement to-day. Very different from the ordinary thing—sitting deadly still and being stared at; watching Mr. Mellord fill his pipe; listening to detached sentences that are not meant to have any meaning in them; afraid to speak lest you should alter your expression; wondering whether you are looking dull and heavy and stupid, and whether that will appear in the portrait. No, there was little of that to-day. The fact is, I happened to see Captain Erle as we were driving down—he lives in Kensington Gore, you know—and I stopped the carriage, and asked him whether he wouldn't come in

and sit with me for a while in Mr. Mellord's studio, and he said 'Yes' directly, and in we went. There was a difference! You know what an amusing man he is, dear Mrs. Hume—been everywhere—seen everything—with a trick of mock exaggeration—mere cynicism—that is really very funny; and Mr. Mellord was as much cheered up as I was; I am sure it must have put ever so much more spirit into his work. I don't know how long Captain Erle staid—the time went quickly enough anyhow; and I was very grateful; indeed, I asked him to come to our box at the Haymarket to-night."

Nothing was said for a second, but at length Mrs. Hume remarked, somewhat coldly, "Of course you know best, Helen, but don't you think Mr. Mellord considered it rather odd that you should take a stranger with you into his studio?"

"Oh dear no!" she made answer, with an easy confidence. "He was delighted—charmed. Of course he knew Captain Erle

by name. And as for me, I would not have believed that sitting to have one's portrait painted could be made quite pleasant. And as I say, I think I ought to show my gratitude. I think we must ask Captain Erle to come home with us to-night for supper, if he cares for such a mild form of dissipation."

And again there was silence—until Sidney observed that he would leave a message with the people at the theatre, so that Captain Erle should have no difficulty in finding the box.

Nor had Captain Erle any difficulty in finding the box. He had the air of a man who could make his way about without much difficulty. He was about thirty; of middle height; sun-tanned face, with short side whiskers; spare of form and wiry-looking; rather elaborately dressed, with a conspicuous button-hole. Lady Helen made much of him from the very outset; turned and talked to him almost continuously,

from behind her fan, while the performance was proceeding; and had hardly a word for any one else. They could have received but the baldest idea of what the piece was; they laughed and chatted—for the most part about the sayings and doings and characteristics of the people they knew. The poor players, doing their best, were all unheeded.

Then he drove home with them to Upper Brook Street; and when they went into the dining-room it looked exceedingly cool and pleasant on this hot night; for there were on the snow-white table blocks of ice festooned with maidenhair fern, and tall salvers filled with yellow roses; while the windows had been left open, with some partial screening-out of any inquisitive passer-by. Supper was a mere farce—except, perhaps, as regards the strawberries. Lady Helen's sole attention and her mirthful eyes were centred on her new guest, while he was telling her merry tales of the ex-

perience and escapades of officers' wives in India. Not that he addressed himself exclusively to her, but he addressed himself chiefly to her because she was his hostess; the others were free to listen if they liked. And perhaps the grand-looking lady who presided at this table did condescend to listen, with a certain cold austerity of demeanour; but as for Sidney, his eyes were absent; clearly he was thinking of quite other and distant things—perhaps of the oars that

“won their way

Where the narrowing Symplegades whitened the
straits of Propontis with spray?”

No, this was not as the other evenings had been; the little family group had been invaded and disconcerted; a stranger had been introduced—a stranger who had no kind of idea of remaining a stranger, but seemed resolved upon monopolising the whole of Lady Helen's replies and smiles and hospitalities. When Sidney Hume's

wandering fancies came back from the shores of the Propontis, he rapidly discovered that he was being bored. He listened for a while, indifferently. And then, as he did not see why he should go on being bored, he rose and begged Lady Helen to excuse him, and bade her good-night. She pressed him to stay, but he said he had been keeping too late hours recently. And, of course, when he left, Captain Erle had to go also.

Now, as Sidney walked along to his hotel, he was inclined to be angrily resentful over this intrusion, but not so much on his own account as on account of his mother. Mrs. Hume, as Lady Helen was well aware, had a particular dislike towards this man; she had done all that could be expected of her in the way of civility when he called of an afternoon; and it was not fair—at least so her son judged—that she should be confronted with him in the intimacy of a little after-theatre supper-

party. It argued a certain want of delicacy on the part of Lady Helen, in view of the particular position Mrs. Hume held in the house. Or downright selfishness? Personally, he had no quarrel with Captain Erle. He regarded him as a fair type of the ordinary man about town. But he had a great regard and respect for his mother; and so annoyed was he over this lack of consideration (as he deemed it) that he had thoughts of going along the next morning and demanding that she should at once return to Henley, himself accompanying her.

But on that next morning Lady Helen came downstairs in a most penitent mood. She knew she had done wrong, and she begged of her dear Mrs. Hume to forgive her. She had been vexed and hurt by Mr. Sidney's masterful and half-contemptuous ways, and by his refusal to go to Mr. Mel-lord's studio with her; and she had accidentally caught a glimpse of Captain Erle

in Kensington Gore, and some madness had possessed her to stop and speak to him, with all that followed thereafter. And did the mother think that Mr. Sidney would forgive her too? He could not be mortally offended? What was Captain Erle to her? Indeed, it was almost impertinent of him to intrude on so chance an invitation.

And very contrite the fair penitent still remained when Mr. Sidney made his appearance; and she was extraordinarily kind to him; and would willingly have given up going to some ceremony of trooping the colour in St. James's Park, whither they were bound, if only she could have heard of some lecture on Greek excavations which they could attend. And that evening, again, when they had to go to a dance at a big house near the top of Kensington Palace Gardens, she quite overwhelmed him with her gracious favour. She said she was ready to 'sit out' any number of dances with him, for the night was hot; so

they remained apart, listening to the music and the swift whistle of slippers on the waxed floor, or they sat on the stairs and talked, or they made adventurous excursions into nooks and corners in search of cool currents, while all the time she was at once vivacious and merry and tender. On one of these voyages of discovery they had wandered back into the supper-room, which was now serving as a sort of buffet ; and here they found open doors leading into a conservatory into which they had not as yet penetrated. It certainly was not a cool place, as they found when they entered, for the air was heavy with the odours of pendulous blossoms ; but there was a trickling of water somewhere that was pleasant enough. The glass roof was vaulted.

“ If we could only turn off those electric lights,” she said, at haphazard, “ I suppose we should find the stars looking down on us.”

"I shouldn't wonder," he said, in the same idle fashion, "if the new day was beginning to show—over the trees in Kensington Gardens."

But presently she said, with a little becoming hesitation: "There is one thing I want to ask of you, now that we have a moment by ourselves. I hope you won't mind. And I do think that—that, considering the terms on which we are, you might drop a small and useless formality that comes between us. I really hate to be called Lady Helen by any one I know intimately. Why don't you call me Helen?"

"Well," he said, "it is much more simple and natural, and you are very kind."

"Then may I call you Sidney?" she asked, with a pretty affectation of shyness.

"Why, yes, of course. Everybody calls me Sidney," was the answer.

"Everybody!" she said, impatiently. "I don't allow everybody to call me Helen. However," she went on, with a

return to her good-nature, "that is of little consequence. It is to be Sidney and Helen, then? A compact?"

"By all means," he responded. "Though there may have to be some compromise now and again—before strangers, 'you know.'"

"But it is a compact? Then here is my hand on it," she said, frankly, and with frank eyes.

Now if she had held his hand, for but one second, or even for two, nothing need have happened; it was the inadvertent third second that wrought the mischief; for here was Mrs. Hume at those open glass doors.

"I have been searching for you people everywhere," she exclaimed. "Do you know how late, or how early, it is?"

The quickly withdrawn palm in the third second was too late. Mrs. Hume had sharp and shrewd eyes; she hesitated only for a moment, where another woman would have

made some blundering excuse and sought retreat. As for her, she went quickly forward, smiling, happy, and took Lady Helen's hands in hers, and kissed her effusively on both cheeks.

“Dearest, dearest Helen!” she said. And shortly thereafter the three of them were driving homewards, mostly in silence, and with sufficiently varied thoughts.

CHAPTER VI.

“ WITH HER APRIL EYES.”

It was the first day of June, and a glory of summer lay over the land. Out here at Henley the fair and cloudless blue of the sky seemed to be far away and remote from the slumbering earth ; all the vast intervening space was a shining wonder of light ; while the variable airs that floated in butterfly fashion hither and thither were fresh and sweet with the scent of the hawthorn and the lilacs and the masses of wall-flower, golden-yellow and crimson, that basked in the hot sun. The prevailing silence seemed all the more intense because of the silver trilling of the larks and the

calling of children in the distant meadows on the Berkshire side of the stream. There was hardly any other sound, and there was but little sign of life either on the river, or along its banks, or even in the town itself; for high noon at Henley (except at Regatta-time) means an old-world, old-fashioned drowsiness and torpor and content, sufficiently impressive to any one who has just come away from the furious London whirl. The golden tassels of the laburnum droop idly in the still sunshine; a dog asleep on a doorstep can dream on without fear of disturbance.

And it was to escape into this gracious calm and quiet, it was to face certain problems that loom large in the imagination of four-and-twenty, that Sidney Hume had abruptly fled away from London. He had found an admirable excuse. Quite recent discoveries of inscriptions had again drawn his attention to a subject that had always had for him a curious fascination—the

wanderings, namely, of those companies of Greek actors who, in the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christ, went travelling all over Asia, not only performing the old masterpieces of Greek tragedy and comedy, but also carrying with them a poet—each little troupe with its own poet—for the production of new pieces. India beheld those *thiasi*, those bands of strolling players; Egypt treated them well; from court to court they went, from festival to festival; amply paid and amply belauded; exempt from military service—in fact, the spoiled children of Dionysus; each nomadic corporation complete within itself—actors, singers, costume-makers, manager, treasurer, with likewise the harmless, necessary poet. And what, now, if this young Fellow of All Souls' were to lay aside, for a time at least, his inchoate and dusky Scythian studies to take up a much more bright and vivid theme, that appealed far more directly to his own tastes and sympathies? But then

he would have to look round among his books ; and his books were at Henley. So down he came to Henley ; and no doubt his mother and Lady Helen assumed, perhaps with some touch of impatience, that it was this new subject that had demanded so great a sacrifice of him just as the London season was nearing its height.

Nevertheless, as he now wandered in solitary self-communion along the placid banks of the Thames, or loitered high up among the Wargrave woods, it was not the Dionysia of two thousand years ago that chiefly claimed his attention. He was confronted with the problem of his own future, and that in a very pressing and peremptory manner. For it was clear that his mother expected him to marry Lady Helen Yorke ; and not only that, but she seemed to assume that Lady Helen herself was also looking forward to this natural climax. Assuredly Lady Helen had gone out of her way to show him every mark of

her favour. She had presented him with the beautiful head of Hera that now confined his scarf; she ostentatiously wore the little trinket he had given her at Oxford; she called him Sidney, and Helen she was to him when no strangers were present; while she had so continually associated herself with him and her pursuits that even at this moment, though he was not conscious of any more mysterious and more powerful magnetism, her mere absence left with him an undefined sense of loneliness. It is true that no word or sign of any understanding had passed between them. The little ceremony that Mrs. Hume had so inopportunately beheld and misinterpreted meant nothing at all, though it was obviously impossible for either of them to tell her so. Indeed, this young fellow found himself in a very awkward position, though how he had got there he hardly knew; and the question was whether he should at once back out of it, or go on and answer

to the expectations that appeared to have been formed.

Then came the next question—a question of appalling importance truly: What was this passion of love that the poets had been writing about all these centuries, and was it a necessary prelude to marriage? He had had his youthful fancies, of a nebulously sentimental nature, of course. As a mere school-boy he had been captivated by the fair, insomuch that his jealous rage and championship had led him into fisticuffs. But as a young man, while the sister or cousin of one of his college companions may have attracted him by reason of her pretty profile or graceful figure, the charm was but momentary; while in ordinary society he found himself most drawn to a girl or woman who could talk amusingly and cleverly, no matter what might be her equipment in the way of good looks. But this passion of love, which so far he had escaped, surely it was a real thing? It

was not merely in literature that Aphrodite the implacable—'implacable Cypris, Cypris terrible, Cypris of mortals detested'—slew the sons of men? Did he not see amid the ordinary news of the day how some poor devil of a solicitor's clerk—nay, even some Crown-prince—must needs go and blow his brains out, overcome by this madness of love and despair? On the other hand, there was surely no allurements, nothing desirable, in any such tempestuous frenzy? Surely a union based on esteem and liking and congenial tastes would better commend itself to a reasonable human being. The great bulk of mortals appeared to go through their lives without the need of any chorus to cry, 'O woe! woe! woe!' His own brothers and sisters, for example: they were all getting comfortably along, happily settled, as far as one could make out, and as merry as grigs at the occasional family gatherings in London. He knew his mother was a managing woman; but she

had managed very well for them; and why should not he allow his inclinations to wander in the direction she approved? Lady Helen was of good birth; she had charming manners—though she was a little bit capricious and quick-tempered at times; if she was a few years older than himself, she was still a reigning beauty; and if it came to that, he thought he could make her a better husband, a more considerate helpmate, than that insufferably conceited ass Captain Erle. ‘Above all, be sane,’ he kept repeating to himself. In such an all-important thing as marriage, why should one give way to delirium?

It was in the midst of these cogitations—which, however just and rational they may have sounded in his mental ears, left behind them a curious haunting sensation of uneasiness and distrust, as if he had been persuading himself to go forward to do something from which he instinctively shrunk back—it was in the midst of these

representations and forecasts that Sidney chanced to find himself on Henley bridge, and there he paused for a moment to look at a boat that was coming down stream. The solitary oarsman was a podgy young man in gay white flannels and smart straw hat, who was evidently proud of his performance, looking neither to right nor to left, but swinging along in splendid style. Sidney waited to see him shoot the bridge—no great feat, by-the-way, for the arches, though low, are wide enough; but it suddenly became evident that in his blind eagerness the oarsman had forgotten all about the bridge, that he was, in fact, about to go full tilt on to the middle pier.

"Hi, man! Look out! Where are you coming to?" Hume yelled.

It was too late. Crash went the bow on to the stone buttress; one oar flew out of the young man's hand; the boat swung round, and the next instant all had disappeared, borne on by the current. Sidney

ran to the other side of the bridge. The first thing he saw was an oar; then the boat, keel uppermost; then the young man violently struggling in the water, wildly pawing with both arms, and doing his dead best to drown himself. For a second he got hold of an oar, but that seemed to yield with him; or perhaps in his fright he did not know what he was doing; at all events, he let go, and was again helplessly floundering. This could not last long, as Sidney Hume perceived. He hastily dispossessed himself of his coat and hat, slipped over the parapet, dived, and presently, after a few rapid strokes, had reached and seized this dangerous creature, who clung to him with frantic grips. At the same moment a young fellow, who happened to be pushing off in a gondola a little further down the river, gently and skilfully propelled that long black vessel towards these two. Sidney caught hold of the steel prow, the

gondolier continued his cautious course, and in a couple of minutes they were at the bank, where there was plenty of assistance to help them out. Another boat was put off to intercept the wrecked craft, the oars, and the elegant straw hat—all of which were gently floating down on the stream. The incident did not excite much attention; they are used to such things at Henley; besides, there was hardly any one about. At first the stout young man, all dripping and dishevelled, seemed too bewildered and exhausted to understand what had just occurred; he stood there in limp fashion, panting and gasping to recover his breath.

"Better go into the Red Lion, sir, and get a drop of brandy," said one of the bystanders who had helped to drag him on shore. "Here, take my arm, sir."

And mutely, and without a word of thanks to his rescuer, he obeyed; while Sidney, also dripping, had to go back to

the bridge to pick up his coat and hat; thence he made his way home, which was no great distance.

But about half an hour thereafter, Sidney Hume, sitting in the front garden of Lilac Cottage, and deeply buried in Müller's *Bühnenalterthümer*, was startled by the appearance of a stranger: startled, because he seemed to know, and yet not to know, who this was. Surely he had seen that dumpy figure—the clean-shaven features—the odd expression? And then it flashed upon him that this was no other than the adventurous oarsman he had but recently fished out of the Thames—now no longer, alas! a dapper youth in boating flannels, but a nondescript creature of sombre hue, in garments that were certainly never made for him. The new-comer opened the gate and came along the path; there was a deprecatory look on his face.

“I beg your pardon,” said he, quite humbly. “I have come to apologise.

They told me at the Red Lion where I should find you. Awfully sorry I let you go without a word of thanks. And I've got to apologise, too, for these wretched things," he continued, looking down discontentedly at his borrowed clothes. "Don't wonder you should have noticed them."

Sidney was not aware that he had been guilty of any such rudeness.

"The best they could do for me—while my own things are getting dried," the young man proceeded. "But I didn't want to lose any time in making an apology. Awful bad form, you must have thought it——"

"Not at all, not at all," Sidney said. "You make too much of a little trifle like that. People are always tumbling into the water at Henley and getting helped out—you should see the Regatta-time——"

"Oh, that's all very well. They told me at the Lion what happened. You jumped

off the bridge. And you needn't think, because at the moment I am wearing a suit of waiter's clothes, that I don't know how grateful I ought to be; and I would have said so before, only I was confused when I came out of the water. Awful bad form, you must have thought it; and I want to apologise. My name is Erridge; here is my card——”

He was about to search his pockets, when a quick look of vexation came over his face.

“By the holy poker!” he exclaimed, “I've left every mortal thing in my togs, and they'll all be boiled to pulp. Never mind. My name is Erridge—Dick Erridge—I live at 12 Ransome Terrace, Richmond—and if, any time you are passing, you would look in and have a snack, I'd fix you up as well as I could——” He again became conscious of his clothes. “You needn't imagine, because I'm wearing these infernal things, that I can't produce a decent glass of fizz when a friend calls.”

"You're very kind," Sidney responded. "And now can I offer you anything? If you've swallowed a mouthful or two of Thames water, it wants some qualifying."

"No, thanks—no, thanks," the young man said. There was evidently something on his mind. "It's the other way about. The fact is, I ran down to Henley this morning, intending to visit some friends of mine in the afternoon; and I was merely putting by an hour or two when the accident occurred—an accident, yes!—not good business trying to burst Henley bridge in two! Well, I can't go and call on them now——"

"Why not?" said Sidney.

"Like this?" he remonstrated, regarding his costume with extreme disgust. "Call on them? Looking like a waiter out of employment?"

"The clothes are good enough! Besides, your friends won't care what kind of clothes you are wearing."

“Well, I care,” the other said, doggedly. “I know what’s what. I know when I’m shipshape; and I know when I could hire myself out as a dod-gasted scarecrow. And even when my own togs are dried, they’ll be all rumpled up as if they’d been sent home in a basket of dirty linen. I’m not going up to see Jim Summers like this—Mr. Summers, I mean—Mr. Summers: perhaps you don’t know him?”

“No, I think not.”

“He hasn’t been long in this neighbourhood, and he lives a mile or two out of the town,” continued this communicative young man. “He and his daughter. I don’t know what has put it into his head, but he seems to have taken a fancy for making a hermit of himself—hiding in the woods like a dormouse or a hedgehog—and so I thought it would be only friendly to run down now and again and wake the old chap up. I intended to have driven down, but one of my cobs wants a little

bit of quiet and doctoring—oh, nothing—nothing to speak of; and so I came along by rail—to jam my moon-struck head against Henley bridge."

"But why shouldn't you call on your friends all the same?" Sidney inquired, good-naturedly. He began to be quite interested in this guileless youth.

He stretched out his arms, displaying his bulging sleeves, he looked down on his twisted trousers, with an inexpressible loathing.

"Like this?" he repeated, almost reproachfully. "Like this? Why, Jim Summers is the best fellow in the world—Mr. Summers, I mean—but he'd burst out laughing; he'd ask me where the petroleum was, so that I could set myself on fire for a Guy Fawkes. No; what I want to suggest, Mr. Hume—I understand that is your name, and I am proud to make your acquaintance, as I ought to be after the good turn you did me to-day—well, as

I can't go to call on my friends, because of these infernal rags, I thought you might come along to the Red Lion and have a bit of early dinner with me. Oh, they'll do you proper at the Lion—trust me for that—Pommery A1—asparagus the best out of Covent Garden. Of course it's rather cheeky of me to ask you—and you mightn't like to walk with anybody dressed in clothes like these——”

“Your clothes are good enough, man!” Sidney said, brusquely.

“But don't you see, I could slip along first—and we'd have a private room,” the young man went on. “I want to show you that I am sensible of what you did for me. I'm a stupid ass, I know, and I was confused when I got out of the water; but I am not such a bounder as to walk off, just after having my life saved, without a word of thanks—except through a mistake, as I say. And I'll go along now and see about things. What hour shall we fix?”

However, Sidney, with some ambiguous promises as to the future, got out of this hospitable invitation; and Dick Erridge was going rather disappointedly away, when an idea seemed to strike him. He stopped at the gate.

"Got anything on the Manchester cup?" he asked of Sidney.

"No," was the casual reply.

And then at once the stout young man grew alert and happy; here was one small way in which he could show his gratitude.

"Red Wallet," said he, significantly. "Don't you pay any heed to what happened at Epsom—that's all understood. If you can get on at 9 to 1, you plank down a tidyish bit: it's a good thing, I tell ye. Red Wallet. Don't forget."

"I won't," said Sidney. "Good-bye. And I hope we shall meet again."

"When I'm less like an all-fired scarecrow than I am at present," the young man

said, with a grim laugh ; and then he took his leave, and hurried away along to the hotel, to get in out of the daylight. Sidney returned to his seat under the veranda and to his book, and very soon forgot all about the luckless oarsman whom he had piloted ashore from the middle of the Thames.

Next morning there came a letter from London, and even as he opened it there fluttered out a newspaper cutting—a paragraph which gave a most flattering description of Lady Helen's appearance at the last F. O. reception, with full details of her costume and ornaments, the latter including the famous Monks-Hatton sapphires. But indeed this communication from Mrs. Hume was all about Lady Helen, and about what she and the writer were doing or about to do. Dearest Helen, he was told, was so good. They had met Captain Erle in the Park on the previous Sunday morning, but she had not stopped

to speak to him, which would have ended in his turning and walking with them; she had merely bowed and passed on. Helen and she were going that night to Covent Garden to hear *Lohengrin*. There was to be a great gathering of Hays and Humes at the Caledonian Ball; and dear Helen was looking forward with the greatest interest to making the acquaintance of certain members of the family whom she had not yet met. And so forth. Then came an urgent entreaty that he should return. Had he not found sufficient books? Could he not bring them to London? Or, indeed, postpone this literary work altogether until the season was over? And then, of course, there was a postscript: “You will see by the enclosed that the papers speak of the jewellery Helen wore at the Foreign Office the other night; but they failed to notice a *small gold amulet*, which she never parts with.”

It was but a letter, to be laid aside and

forgotten, if he chose. Yet all that morning, as he sat in the quiet garden overlooking the river, amid the soft sweet scents of the lilac bushes and the southernwood, the pictures summoned up by the pages of Müller or Lüders were again and again being interfered with and superseded by far other and different scenes. The Hellenistic world of two thousand years ago, dumb and distant, gave place to the modern world of London, with its continuous, monotonous murmur of fashion and festivity. And what if he were to yield to this urgent appeal? He knew not whither his consent might lead; but he knew the desire that was in his mother's heart. Then again he returned to his curious questionings: were the passionate frenzy, the bitter longing, the agony and despair of love mere tricks of trade on the part of the poets, mere conventionalities of literature?—or, on the other hand, if they were only too real, were they not things to be avoided by any sane person

wishing to remain sane? Moreover, if he now returned to London, the season would not last for ever. He could take some books with him to fill in the odd hours. Then would come a cessation of that mad pursuit of pleasure ; then would come quiet and application, with perhaps some definite achievement of work to justify his training and his toil.

And yet, plausible as this reasoning may have been, it left behind it, as his former dim speculations had done, the strangest restlessness, and even a dull, nameless, inexplicable regret. At last he threw down the book. He could bear this inaction, these haunting meditations, no longer. He got his stick and hat and set forth. All this bright, breezy, beautiful world seemed to call for some joy of motion, some freer breathing, some happier elasticity of thought. The tall poplars were swaying and rustling against the blue of the sky ; the drooping willows dipped and trembled over the

stream ; the big leaves of the wistaria in the trelliswork were blown across the branches of purple blossom ; while the gusts of wind, alternating with bursts of sunlight, struck the surface of the river into wide sheets of silver, though there was a sharp gleam of azure further along, where the daisied fields appeared to meet. And when he got further out into the country, all this moving, changing panorama seemed to grow more vivid and intense. Now a row of elms along an upland height would grow almost black against the deep cerulean spaces of the heavens ; again the sunlight, springing down upon a field of charlock, would produce a glare of lemon-yellow bewildering to the eye. Rooks were cawing above the topmost branches ; larks carolling high in the clear air ; sheep bleating in the distant pastures ; a cock bidding bold defiance from some neighbouring farm : about the only silent creature he encountered was a cuckoo that with noiseless hawklike

flight sought shelter in the umbrageous foliage of a sycamore. A summer day it was, though with some surviving look of the spring about it. There even came a sudden shower; but as the rain fell in the open sunlight between the golden-green meadows and a shadowed line of upland, it merely formed a shimmering silver veil, that gradually disappeared, leaving heat behind.

And quite springlike was the next thing he saw when he returned to the town. It was a wedding at St. Mary's Church, and the bells were ringing, and the coachmen wore fine nosegays, and twin rows of young damsels, each holding a basket of flowers, waited to scatter blossoms in the path of the bride as she walked from the church door to the gate. It was going to be a pretty sight, and he thought he would stay to see it. It was of our own time: why should it not interest him as much as the chanting of the twelve Laconian maidens

outside the Spartan bridal bower of Helen? A small sprinkling of a crowd, mostly women, had gathered round the gate, murmuring in their talk, and benignly expectant.

Then the bride appeared, in all her white array, leaning on the arm of the bridegroom, and followed by her bridesmaids and friends; and as the newly married couple came along the pathway to the gate, the small wenches with the baskets threw flowers before them, but especially before the feet of the bride, who hardly looked to one side or the other; so agitated was she. Yet this was a happy wedding. The sun shone on it and on the gay procession of folks; and Sidney thought the scattering of those handfuls of blossoms a very winsome ceremony—here in front of the old-fashioned English church, in the quiet old-fashioned English town.

And now—now came his undoing, the work of an instant. There had been stand-

ing not far from him a young girl whom he had hardly noticed, for her back was towards him, and he had been chiefly occupied in watching the small lasses strewing the flowers. But as soon as the bride had passed, this girl turned to come away; and as she did so, her eyes suddenly encountered his. She had not been prepared to meet the gaze of any stranger; she also had been regarding that pretty spectacle of the children and the fluttering marguerites and pansies; and she was smiling in sympathy, her lips slightly parted, her eyes full of amiability and kindness. Nay, for him, startled as he was, they were full of far more than that: all the spring and all the summer seemed to dwell there, and the sweet desire of youth, and innocence, and the timidity of a fawn. He was vaguely aware of a bewilderment of beauty about her face, and of a clear and rose-tinted complexion; and likewise there was some kind of surrounding glory of hair. But

these things were as nothing; he only knew that in this moment of self-forgetfulness on her part he had unwittingly gazed into her very soul—shining in those happy, youthful eyes that were as blue as the blue of a June sea. Then, the next instant, frightened, she had withdrawn that inadvertent glance, and had continued on her way, her head downcast, her steps somewhat hurried. He stood transfixed, breathless, almost benumbed, as it were. He saw her pass quickly along the pavement. Why, even the very colours of her dress—the cool light lilacs, with a touch of yellow and white—seemed also to speak of youth and freshness, and the blooms and sprays of the early summer. Was it some vision that had been vouchsafed him?—for she had suddenly disappeared. He had no power to follow; he dared not follow; he felt as though he had already been guilty of some wrong.

And perhaps he had. For in that moment

of forgetfulness and smiling sympathy and good wishes her eyes also had met his, and had found something there. Alas! that was the tragic part of it.

CHAPTER VII.

“IMPLACABLE CYPRIS.”

THIS haunted street seemed strangely empty; it was as if all the singing of all the birds had suddenly ceased from the sky, and the earth been stricken dumb with dismay. Yet that was no incorporeal vision of the loveliness of the summer that he had beheld for a fleeting moment or two. Those eyes that had unwittingly gazed into his were human—too human, perhaps, in that second of self-revelation; and altogether human was the sympathy and kindliness and unconscious well-wishing that shone in the bright young face with its smiling lips. There was nothing ghostly or phantomlike about the clear wild-rose tints of her com-

plexion—that seemed to speak of June and hedge-rows and sunlight—nor yet about the waves and tangles of golden-brown hair, which, even as she turned from him, he had perceived clustering about her singularly white neck and small ear. And then somehow an immeasurable pity filled his heart. Why should she have to hurry away with downcast head, as one abashed and ashamed? Was it her fault that the pretty spectacle of the children strewing flowers should have made her oblivious of herself for a brief instant? Was it not rather his fault that, bewildered as he was, he had not with sufficient quickness avoided that wholly inadvertent glance? He had inflicted wrong without any hope of making reparation. For, even if he were to encounter this beautiful young creature again, how was he to let her know that he held himself wholly to blame for anything that had occurred? That meant speech, whereas a mere look had been

sufficient to frighten her away like a startled fawn.

That he would be certain to see her again in a small place like Henley he made no doubt at all. Most probably she was a visitor down from London for the summer months, and she and her friends on their way to the bridge or the river-side would naturally come along this Hart Street, the main thoroughfare. Then, again, even to discover where she lived would be something. And what could be the harm? If one only knew the house, would there not always be the possibility of beholding in the distance a gleam of cool fresh lilac and pale yellow-white that would lend a new wonder to the glory of a June day? And if that were all—well, so be it. Some others were more happy. Even at this moment she might be laughing and telling her friends of the bridal procession, and the children, and the scattering of pansies and marguerites. She had forgotten all about the

stranger whom she had so accidentally regarded with her deep-wounding April eyes.

Now when Nan Summers disappeared out of Hart Street, she had merely turned into Bell Street, which is the beginning of the road to Oxford, and thither, after some ten minutes of furious contention with himself, Sidney felt constrained to follow. Yet, when he reached the quiet little thoroughfare, that also seemed empty; there was hardly any sign of life, save for the white-tipped martins that kept skimming close to the ground, sometimes even alighting for a moment on the watered roadway, and then rising again into the hot air. But presently he noticed—what he must have known before—that here were several old-fashioned inns, with court-yards and stabling; and now it occurred to him that this wonderful visitor might have come in from a distance, and might have driven away again. It was not so certain, then, that he must needs, sooner or later, find

himself face to face with her in Henley. Nevertheless a strange kind of unrest, a sort of desperate hope, kept him wandering on and on, and mostly with his eyes fixed on the furthest distance. Or, again, he would glance furtively at these detached villas and at their windows. He heard voices in the gardens, from amongst the red hawthorns and the laburnums and the rhododendrons; and occasionally he caught sight of figures, but not that one slim symmetrical form that he could have recognised anywhere. He did not go out into the country. Eventually he retraced his steps, and passed along Bell Street, scanning those old-fashioned hostelries and their archways and their stable-yards. But all to no purpose. The main thoroughfare of the town he found as empty as ever, though he had some vague heart-sick fancy that she might have occasion to return the way she came. The doors of St. Mary's Church were shut now; most of the

scattered marguerites and pansies had been picked up by children and carried away. He went home to get some food, but neither that nor his books appeared to have any interest for him. He was restless, undetermined, incapable of settling to anything; and presently he had set forth again on another aimless exploration of the straggling and garden-enclosed suburbs of this small town. How long his disquieted wanderings lasted he did not seem to know nor care; but when at length he arrived at the gate of Lilac Lodge, and turned to have a parting look at the sleepily moving river, behold! on the densely foliated heights beyond a solitary golden star here and there told of a house already lit up for the coming night, and the woods were growing dark under the cold metallic gray of the evening sky.

And all the next day this unceasing heart-hunger kept him at his fruitless quest, until, as the hours went helplessly by, it

almost seemed as though that must have been really a vision, an illusory enchantment, that he had beheld at the gate of St. Mary's Church. But on the following afternoon fortune befriended him in a most unexpected fashion. He was returning into Henley by the Medmenham road, and was approaching the point where Bell Street curves out towards the Fair Mile, when he saw, a long way ahead of him, two figures, one of whom he instantly recognized by the colours of her dress. And as those two, leaving the town, drew nearer, he made sure he was not mistaken ; apparition or no apparition, she was once more within view of his eager eyes that had so long sought in vain. And could anything have exceeded the great good luck of this encounter, seeing that at the junction of the Medmenham and Oxford roads there is a patch of wooded enclosure, behind which he could easily screen himself while he allowed them to go by ? They came along.

She seemed more surpassingly beautiful, more radiant, than ever; she was laughing and chatting merrily with her companion—no restraint or fear now in her eyes. This slightly stooping man, with the powerfully built frame, and the grave, quiet face, was no doubt her father; he was mostly listening, in an amused way; he did not talk much. As they passed, Sidney noticed that the man walked rather deliberately, while the girl's step was light and buoyant; and perhaps it was the massive breadth of his shoulders that caused her by contrast to look particularly slight and slim. They continued along the Oxford road, and when they had gone a sufficient distance, Sidney Hume followed. Now he would find out where this wonder of wonders was accustomed to hide herself—perhaps by some lonely upland heath; perhaps in some old grange amidst the silence of the woods.

But fortune never distributes her favours singly. A most unlooked-for incident now

occurred. When father and daughter had left the last of the suburban villas and gardens behind, and were well into the Fair Mile, under the wide-branching and rustling elms, Sidney perceived that there were three navvies coming along from the opposite direction; and as these drew near they paused in a loitering, hesitating sort of way, while one of them addressed the two strangers. Sidney, of course, could only guess what was going on; he held back; he did not wish to be suspected of reconnoitring. Perhaps the three labourers had been in at the Traveller's Rest, and the hot weather was apt to make them thirsty; they might be either frolicsome of mood, or humbly plaintive, or half quarrelsome. At all events, the girl's father, in answer to them, merely shook his head, and would have passed quietly on, giving the three navvies the wider share of the broad pathway. They allowed him to go by; then they seemed to think better of it, and

followed, and plainly intercepted both father and daughter. Sidney quickened his steps. If there was about to be any unpleasantness, would not he arrive at the most opportune moment? Why, never was there such a stroke of luck! Talk of introductions?—here was one ready made! And, as it appeared to him, the labourers had grown distinctly aggressive—they barred the way. It was about time he was on the spot, to make this fight, if there was to be a fight, a little more fair.

But in an instant the whole situation was changed. The girl had interposed herself, doubtless with some frantic hope of appeasing this imminent strife. Sidney could see her hand held up, as if imploring them to desist. Her hurried intervention was of no avail; nay, one of the men, little guessing what danger was lurking near, rudely gripped her by the arm to drag her out of the way. That was the swift ruin of him. The girl's father suddenly made

a step forward, slightly raising himself on his left foot; his left fist drove out, and down the man went like a log, lying prone and extended on the highway. Almost simultaneously the right fist was swung round, catching the second of the scoundrels a terrific backhander on the cheek-bone. He also went staggering and rolling, until he stumbled headlong into the dry ditch. The third man, after a moment's pause of blind amazement, turned and fled as if the very devil were at his heels. All this seemed the work of one bewildering second. It happened with such an astonishing rapidity that when Sidney came eagerly running up there was nothing more to be done.

“ Shall I catch that fellow for you, sir? ” he demanded, quickly. “ I'll get hold of him in a minute, if you like.” And this was no vain boast on the part of the young man, for as a Freshman he had been a famous flier at the hurdles of the O.U.A.C.

It was Nan Summers who answered him, without even a glance to see who this new-comer was.

"No ; leave him alone," she said, peremptorily. "And get those men taken away !"

She was anxiously clinging to her father, both her hands on his arm, while she scrutinised his face in the strangest fashion. His complexion was a little grayer than usual, that was all ; he did not seem in the least perturbed.

"Dodo, come !" she said, imploringly. "Never mind them—leave them alone—they'll do no further harm."

But he gently put her aside. He stepped over to the man who had rolled into the ditch, caught him by the collar, and dragged him to his knees.

"Quit shamming," said he, briefly—for this rascal held his hand to his head, and moaned and moaned. "You're not hurt. I don't know about this other fellow. You'll have to look after him. Get him

along to the Traveller's Rest, and give him a drop of something—unless he's had enough already."

"Ay, he's had enough already, guv'nor," was the whining answer; "and it ain't gin and it ain't beer he's had enough of, but he's had enough. And my jaw's broken, that's what it is——"

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Summers, taking out a couple of shillings. "Here, this will pay for the beer and the sticking-plaster; and the next time you and your mates think of playing tricks on strangers, mind you choose the right sort of people."

"If you would like to prosecute these scoundrels, sir," said Sidney, interposing, "I shall be glad to be a witness. I saw the whole affair from the beginning, and I tried to be up in time to help you, but you were not long in settling the matter."

"Oh no; we'll leave them alone," said Mr. Summers, quietly, seeing that the

other man had now in a measure recovered his senses, and was sitting up, staring about him in a limp and dazed way. "They won't forget that little lesson for a while."

"But surely it is monstrous," Sidney continued—and as Mr. Summers and his daughter were now moving away from the scene of this rapid and conclusive scuffle, it appeared only natural that he should go with them—"it is monstrous that peaceable people, walking along an open highway, should be liable to insult and menace of this kind. However, such a thing very rarely happens; I have known Henley and the districts round it for years, and hardly ever heard of such an occurrence. I hope you won't consider it a common feature of Oxfordshire life——"

"Oh no, not at all," said this sallow-complexioned man with the grave, tranquil face. "My daughter and I have lived some months now in the neighbourhood,

and found it particularly quiet, and the people well-behaved."

"Oh, you know the neighbourhood, then?" Sidney said, with skilful promptitude. "Then you know how beautiful it is, especially in the lonelier parts, away from the main roads?"

"We are finding out day by day, just as we happen to have leisure," Mr. Summers answered, and presently the talk of the two men was all about heaths and woods and lanes, about Stonor Park and Rotherfield Greys, about Highmore Cross and Witheridge Hill, and about the long drive through the beech woods that crown the lofty land lying between Bix and Nettlebed.

And meanwhile what of Nan Summers? Well, from the moment she discovered who this was who had come to offer them assistance, she had betrayed the most inexplicable embarrassment, and even alarm, insomuch that Sidney himself could not but become conscious of it. She would

not enter into their conversation ; she would not even look his way ; she seemed to hide herself from him, on the other side of her father. All the happy audacity of mirth and high spirits he had beheld in her face as those two were coming out from Henley had departed ; there was nothing but constraint there now. She walked on in silence ; and when she lifted her eyes from the ground, it was not in his direction—it was in any other direction. What was the reason of this marvellous change ? he asked himself. Surely the agitation produced by that brief scuffle could not so profoundly have affected her. In point of fact, she had shown no fear at all ; it was about her father that she had betrayed anxiety, especially after the two men had been thrown aside from him like a couple of ninepins. On the other hand, was it possible that the little occurrence at the gate of St. Mary's Church still dwelt in her mind, causing her deep-lying mortifica-

tion? But it was hardly credible that she should place so much importance on so trifling an incident, unless she was of an extraordinary sensitiveness that he could in no wise understand.

And so they walked on; and Mr. Summers seemed to have formed a great liking for this young stranger, whose personal charm of manner, when he chose to exert it, to say nothing of his good looks, had always made it easy for him to win friends. Sidney, on his part, strove scrupulously to preserve that gulf of distance between himself and the young lady which she appeared to have established. She might have been non-existent so far as his rapid and discursive talk was concerned, though to him it was an altogether miraculous thing that she should be only a few feet away, and consciously listening. Only once was she dragged into the conversation, and that was none of his doing. Her father was describing a certain stretch of highway

they had discovered on the heights between Crowhurst and Bix Turnpike; and he said that this remote thoroughfare, with its strips of common on each side, was hardly ever used; it was a kind of no-man's-land.

"I have even thought of taking possession of it, in the name of my daughter here," he went on, in a half-jesting way; "only I suppose I should want a banner and a sword, and perhaps some cannon to fire. And, indeed, her new kingdom, I'm afraid, would only bring her trouble. For there's an extraordinary lot of wild flowers about the hedge-rows; and latterly, as if she hadn't enough to do with the seeds and plants and slips in the garden, she has taken to the out-of-door flowers as well, with all kinds of botanical books. I can't help her, of course; I don't know about such things; and when she is trying to find out the name of a new flower, the scientific descriptions appear so difficult, and so like one another——"

“Oh, but that is the simplest thing in the world,” Sidney said at once. “All that is necessary is to get an old-fashioned Flora—either one based on the Linnæan system, or one with the Linnæan system as an appendix, to be used as a key. That is by far the easiest way of finding out the name of a plant,” he went on, overjoyed to have the chance of talking about anything, so long as it furnished an excuse for his continuing to accompany them. “Of course the natural classification that is generally adopted nowadays is the more reasonable ; but the beginner wants first of all to discover what these flowers and plants are, and the Linnæan system makes so easy and simple a key——”

“Do you hear that, Nan?” her father said, turning to her.

This unexpected question visibly disconcerted her, but she managed to murmur something in reply: her eyes were still fixed on the ground. As for Sidney, he

was almost on the point of desperately breaking this spell of silence. As it happened, botany had been one of the hobbies of his boyhood; he still retained a sufficient recollection of the commoner genera and species to be met with along the hedge-rows or in the woods; and why, he asked himself, in this wild chaos of daring hopes and desires—why should she not in her troubles and difficulties come to him direct? Surely that would be an idyllic employment for a calm summer evening, up on the silent, high-lying, sunset-warmed heaths and commons, with the valleys below sinking to sleep in the gathering mists, and with a gradual softening of all distant sounds. Would she bring to him some imagined rarity, holding it up in her small white fingers, her eyes turned towards his? Nay—so rapidly did this or that fancy shoot like a swift-darting shuttle through the warp and woof of his actual and eager conversation—he was at this

moment wondering which of all the flowers in garden or wildwood was nearest to the colour of those hidden eyes. The forget-me-not? — too cold and opaque. The lobelia? — too blackish-blue. The germander-speedwell? — that was something nearer it — tender and springlike — clear and yet deep — with some strange power of appeal, some power of saying mystical, unsearchable things. And why should those beautiful lucent eyes be so rigorously turned away from him? He had done nothing to cause her fear.

He knew not how long he walked with them; he clung to this surprising chance that had so happily befallen. Nor even yet had the amazing good fortune of this young man come to an end. When the three of them arrived opposite a certain white gate, Nan paused, stopped, and then turned aside, her eyes still downcast; but her father hesitated for a second.

“I have got an Ordnance Survey map of

the neighbourhood," he said to the young stranger. "If you wouldn't mind stepping in for a moment, you might show me the whereabouts of some of those places you mentioned: they would be easier to remember when you have once seen them."

"Oh, I shall be delighted!" said Sidney, asking himself what was going to happen to him next. He had not only discovered where that rarely beautiful creature lived; he was now being invited to enter the house. It seemed all too marvellous to be real.

And yet he was careful not to presume. He went no farther than the hall; for it was in the hall that the large map, pieced together, hung; and soon, with the aid of a pocket-pencil, he was pointing out lines of highway and explaining. The young lady had disappeared; but presently she returned, and she brought with her a bottle and a small liqueur-glass.

"Dodo," she said to her father, in an undertone.

He turned to see what she wanted.

“No, no, Nan,” he said, gently. “I am perfectly well.”

“But are you sure?” she said, regarding his face with a curiously earnest look.

“Perfectly—perfectly,” he answered her. “You mustn’t be put out by such a trifle, Nan.”

So she went away again, and that was the last that Sidney saw of her at this time; for she did not even come back to bid him good-bye. And presently he took his leave, and got away from this enchanted dwelling on the lonely uplands, and was making his way back to Henley through the beech woods. But in truth he was not exultant over this rare good fortune that had happened to him; rather he was anxious and disturbed, his heart and brain alike bewildered and sick and ill at ease. He did not quite know the meaning of all that had occurred, nor could he guess at its consequences; it seemed to him that he

had been ‘in a hollow land’; that he had beheld strange things; that he had been all too near to ‘Nycheia, with her April eyes.’

But as for Nan Summers, all this evening—now that the stranger had gone—she was in a particularly affectionate mood, and light-hearted and merry, except at rare intervals, when she would sink into a profound reverie, from which again she would almost instantly rouse herself.

“It will be a splendid story to tell Mr. Erridge,” said she at dinner, and now she was laughing over that adventure of the afternoon. “It will delight him. How he will wish he had been there!”

“It is nothing to speak about, Nan,” said her father. “Only there are two men in Henley who are a little wiser this evening.”

“Three, Dodo, three,” she said. “The one who ran away was even more frightened than the others; and I almost wish we had allowed the—the young gentleman to run

after him and catch him and bring him back. I should like to have seen that one also sorry—and hoping you wouldn't be hard on him."

"No, no, Nan: it is better to let things pass quietly," her father said. It was a familiar phrase of his.

Then again, after dinner, when they were strolling through the adjacent plantation, and she was nestling close to his side, she said:

"Do you know, Dodo, I am very glad now that you met with those three insolent rascals, though I was terribly frightened at the time about the effect it might have on you. It has had no effect at all—not the slightest. And I have been convincing myself that the doctors were altogether wrong about you. The vicar used to say that they were always making mistakes about heart-disease—frightening people unnecessarily—sometimes making some poor man or woman who was quite well live in a

kind of slavery for years and years. And look at you, Dodo. You have a quarrel thrust on you; you have to face three men—three of them at once, and threatening; you send one of them spinning this way, and another one rolling that—oh, I wish Mr. Erridge could have seen it!—and then you walk quietly on as if nothing had happened; and when you come home you won't even take the little glass of brandy that I offer you! Dodo, there's not much of the invalid about you, that I'm sure of."

He laughed at her gay courage. "It matters very little, Nan," he said. "I don't think I live in any fear: one must die of something. And I am all the more unconcerned now that I have got you a home of your own; and if you had only a few companions——"

"Dodo, I wish for no companions," she said, quite earnestly. "For you and me to be by ourselves—that is what I wish for, always and always. Of course I am very

glad when Mr. Erridge drives down, for he can talk to you about things I don't understand, and he is very cheerful and amusing, even when he is not aware of it. But as for companions—well, when you get tired of me, Dodo, I will go and see if I can find some companions."

Then, when they had gone in-doors, and had the lamps lit, and when she had brought him his pipe, and taken a seat at his feet, with a book in her hand from which to read aloud to him, she did not begin at once. It was the *Lays of Ancient Rome* she had brought—"Horatius," "Virginia," "The Battle of the Lake Regillus," were great favourites of his; but the volume remained unopened, and her eyes were thoughtful and absent.

"Well, Nan?" he said.

She seemed to start out of some dream. "Yes, Dodo," she answered. "I've read up about Henry of Navarre, and I can tell you all about him, and then we can go

back to the Ivry ballad. You like that about as well as any of them, don't you?" But she did not proceed with her historical lecture. The book lay unheeded in her lap. Presently she said, with downcast eyes, "About—about that young gentleman who was here this afternoon, Dodo: if you should meet him in Henley, what do you mean to do?"

"How?"

"Well, would you speak to him?" she asked, with some hesitation.

"If he spoke to me, yes," her father made answer. "I don't seek to make acquaintances, as you know, Nan; but if any one chooses to speak to me, I must be civil."

"You don't even know his name," she said, beating about the bush.

"That is a small matter."

And then, in the desperation of her embarrassment, she managed to raise her eyes, which were almost piteous.

“But it’s different with you, Dodo,” she exclaimed. “If I were to meet him—if I were alone—what must I do? He has been in this house; and he has talked to you for a long time, while he was walking with us; but I do not know him: to me he is a perfect stranger. And suppose I were to be coming out of a shop—and he chanced to be passing——”

“Well, he seems very friendly: if he stopped to say a few words, you could but answer,” her father said.

“Talk to a stranger?—what would he think of me!” she exclaimed again, almost with indignation.

“Or perhaps he would only take off his hat to you, and pass on,” her father suggested. “Surely you know about such things better than I do.”

She lowered her eyes; and she was silent for a second or two. When she spoke, it was very slowly:

“Don’t you think, Dodo—it would be

better—if both you and I—were to treat him quite as a stranger—that is, if we should ever meet him again ? ”

“ As you please, Nan, just as you please,” he responded at once. He could deny her nothing ; and in his eyes she was always in the right. “ He seemed very friendly and good-natured. But just as you please. You know about such things better than I do. I have never been anxious to make any new acquaintances, so long as you are content with this solitary life : if that is enough for you, it is enough for me.”

And thus it was that these two—the one actuated by a vague, inexplicable alarm and foreboding, the other desirous only of meeting her wishes, and heedful of naught else—resolved upon holding this young man a stranger to them both. But the Fates were otherwise minded.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN GLAMOUR LAND.

“ABOVE all, be sane,” Sidney Hume had kept repeating to himself only a day or two before. But now the bewilderment of this girl’s beauty had driven every consideration of prudence out of his head. He did not stay to ask who she was; he did not stay to ask who or what her father might be, or might have been. Probably he would have said that he already knew all he wanted to know. The girl herself had told him what she was in that inadvertent moment when she allowed a stranger to look into the windows of her soul: he had beheld the purity, the sweetness, the light-heartedness, the beneficent kindliness

dwelling there. As for her father—well, the prompt and effective fashion in which he had bowled over the two navvies on the Oxford Road was a thing that commanded Sidney's entire approval. It was an unusual accomplishment to possess, no doubt. Perhaps he had been the owner of some semi-private gymnasium; perhaps he had been a teacher of athletics; it mattered little. What was of immediate concern to this young man was the actual position and circumstances in which these two were now placed; and he could not but think that the life they appeared to live, from his brief glimpse of it, was a very beautiful, simple, and natural life, far apart from the mean ambitions and jealousies and frivolities of fashion—a life wholesome and inoffensive, and marked by a rare affection that even the most casual stranger could not fail to perceive. An ideal household it seemed to him, in its modest retirement, harming no one, content within itself, amid the silence

and solitude of the Oxfordshire beech woods.

And having been once admitted into this sacred retreat, a relentless longing arose within him to return thither—a longing that became imperative ; he was drawn by cords stronger than any ropes of steel. The only difficulty was to discover some excuse, even of the wildest ; the sleepless hours of the next morning found him still ransacking his brain. There was, it is true, the superseded *Flora* with its Linnæan key of which he had told them ; he could carry that out to Crowhurst, and ring at the door, and leave it for them ; but that was about all ; and the thought of coming away unsatisfied was misery. Then a sudden fancy struck him : apparently she had got no great length with her botanical studies ; her father and she had but recently come to this neighbourhood ; perhaps they had never heard of Wargrave Marsh and its wild snowflakes ? And why should he

wait till the afternoon? People in the country took their walks abroad at all hours. Indeed, why should even a minute be sacrificed? If there was any dawdling, by the time he reached Crowhurst father and daughter might have gone out for the day.

And so, as soon as he had got dressed, he hauled on a pair of half-length fishing-boots; he walked quickly along to the bridge, and hired a light little skiff; and presently he was pulling up stream with the long and steadyswing of a practised oarsman. He had pretty well all the river to himself at this early hour, and had not to pay much attention; but when he had got up to Boulney Court, he held over to the opposite bank, and there, moderating his pace, he began to scrutinise attentively the wilderness of swampy weed and underwood that is known as Wargrave Marsh. At first his search was fruitless; for the flowering month of the *Leucojum æstivum* is May,

and this was the first week in June ; but eventually, when he had driven the bow of the boat ashore, and when he had hunted about through the spongy morass, he came upon the long leaves and white blossoms of the plant he wanted ; and, securing a sufficient quantity, he made his way back to the skiff. Then down with the current again to Henley ; a hurried breakfast ; a hunt for the shabby old Flora ; and presently, with eager and impatient stride, he was leaving the town on his way to Crowhurst among the woods.

It was a vivid and brilliant morning, as became the young summer-time ; a universal trilling of larks filled all the silver spaces of the sky ; there was a soft kurrooing of wood-pigeons ; the tall hedges were powdered white with hawthorn ; the swelling uplands were green with corn ; the rounded summits of the elms were dark against the deep blue of the heavens. A morning of impetuous hope, surely, and audacious

forecast ; a morning full of life and quick-glancing interest ; sportive and joyous, too. A whirlwind that caught up a column of dust from the yellow road and carried it along the highway was only playing, as it were, in order to cool the hot air. It was going to be a day of moving shadows and sudden shafts of sunlight ; but the sunlight, he knew, would predominate ; already the great mass of the variegated landscape lay basking in the golden warmth.

As he was nearing Crowhurst he espied an old man tinkering at a dilapidated fence.

“ What is the name of that house—can you tell me ? ” he asked.

“ That be Crowhurst,” said the ancient gaffer, in a strong Buckinghamshire accent, as he paused from his work. “ It wur Crowhurst farm a’ one time ; but it bain’t a farm-’ouse any mower.”

“ And who lives in it ? ”

“ Why, Mahster Zummers — Mahster Zummers and his dahter.”

“Thank you;” and the young man passed on.

He had already heard her father call her Nan: Anne Summers she was, then? —not an unusual name, perhaps, but it would soon become magical and wonderful enough when associated with her. Then came the necessity of letting these new friends know what his own name was; and for that he had provided a simple stratagem. When he reached the house and rang the bell, and when the smart little maid-servant presented herself, he held a card in his hand. He asked if Mr. Summers was at home, and was answered in the affirmative.

“Will you give him this card, then,” he said, “and tell him I should like to see him for a few moments?”

The appearance of this young gentleman seemed to inspire confidence. She instantly and politely invited him to enter; and he, following, was forthwith shown into the

drawing-room. There he was left alone for a second or two, looking around him with the keenest interest. He guessed what feminine hand was visible in the floral decoration, if that can be called floral which chiefly consisted of sprays of young beech.

The sun was hot without; here, in a soft twilight, the tender yellowish-green of those beech leaves was singularly fresh and cool.

And then Mr. Summers appeared, seemingly not in the least astonished to find who his visitor was; nay, there was quite a friendly look in his grave, submissive eyes.

“I have brought you the Flora I spoke of yesterday,” said Sidney, in his usual simple and straightforward way, “and if Miss Summers will accept the loan of it she will find the Linnæan synopsis very handy and easy to manage. And as I thought she might not be familiar with the snow-

flake—it is rather a rarity growing wild—I've put one or two in this box. She ought to know what to look for when she comes down to the river."

"Thank you, thank you," said Mr. Summers. "But won't you come and explain to herself?—I don't understand about such things. Nan is in the garden——"

"Then I will take the book with me," said the young man, needing no second invitation; and thereupon, but perhaps with a trifle more of perturbation than he cared to show, he followed his guide into the open air.

Out here there was a blaze and dazzlement of colour and sunlight—scarlet geraniums, white geraniums, blue lobelias, gorgeous peonies bursting in crimson from their thick green shell, forget-me-nots, petunias, pansies—and in the midst of it all stood a young girl in cool summer costume, who wore gardening gloves and a straw hat, and who carried a watering-can in her

hand. But she was not at work at the moment; she was chatting to the old Scotch gardener, who was pottering away at some sheltered nasturtiums; and as she was quite unaware of the approach of the newcomers, her talk was unconstrained and blithe enough. Occasionally she turned to water a plant that chanced to be in shadow; but for the most part she was idly and merrily chattering to the old man.

“Nan!” her father called.

She instantly turned, and a swift colour sprang to her face on recognising this visitor; but when, without hesitation, he went forward to her, and modestly made some excuse, and explained his object in thus calling upon them, her embarrassment insensibly departed, and she found herself listening unreservedly and even with gratitude to what this handsome lad had to say. His voice was quiet and reassuring; his manner was frank and natural; his eyes were honest—there was no trace of pretence

or hypocrisy in them. It is true that when she removed her gloves in order to take the open book into her hands, the small plump white fingers were slightly tremulous ; but that was only for a second ; and probably she herself did not know how easily she fell into the way of answering him and questioning him, and thanking him with her eyes as well as with her speech. She was an apt pupil and a willing one, though he disclaimed having anything but the most amateurish knowledge of the subject. Then he opened the tin box he had brought with him and gave her the snowflakes ; and still further she expressed, both by word and look, her gratitude. And now it was time for him to be gone ; his mission was accomplished.

There was a moment of embarrassment. It was she who interposed.

“ You were speaking of the columbine,” she said, adroitly. “ We have some beautiful ones just now. Won’t you come and

look at them? I think some of the cottage-garden flowers are as pretty as any."

She led the way, and the next minute he was regarding the slender and graceful plants, with their pendulous blossoms of various hues—blue-black, rose-purple, rose, and waxen white. And from that starting-point the rest was easy. She took him leisurely round the garden, showing him what they had done and what they meant to do, and all her timidity seemed to have fled. She was talking to him lightly, naturally, and with the most musical and magnetic voice he had ever heard. An amazing experience truly, to be in this solitary world of beautiful, basking, and glowing things, with sweet scents wafted about by the warm wind, and the distant landscape—wooded hills shimmering green in the sunlight—lying remote and silent, as if it belonged to another universe altogether; while this rare creature revealed still another charm—a voice that seemed

to thrill his very heart-strings with its soft melodious tones! Once or twice she laughed as she turned to make some remark to her father, and there was a gleam of perfect teeth between the parted lips. Her face was mostly in shadow, under the straw hat, but her eyes were full of light. And there was no fear in them now. Her companion asked himself how he had ever managed to startle away the gladness and natural gaiety and content that seemed to dwell habitually there.

“Nan,” said her father at length, “you must not take up too much of Mr. Hume’s time, proud as you are of your garden.”

“But it is I who must apologise,” the young man said, “for calling at such an hour. Of course you have all your day’s occupations before you. So I’m afraid I must bid you good-morning.”

But again it was Nan Summers who interposed. It seemed a pity he should go away in this fashion. He had shown him-

self so modest and pleasant-mannered, she would not have him hurry away.

“Are you—are you going back to Henley?” she asked, with a certain shyness.

“Oh yes,” he answered her, with a look of inquiry.

“Because,” said she—“because my father and I will be walking in quite shortly; in a few minutes we shall be starting.”

She could not, in maiden bashfulness, say more; but surely this was enough. And Sidney promptly seized the opportunity. “If you wouldn’t mind,” he said, “if I am not in the way, I should like to wait and walk in with you.”

The quick unguarded look in her eyes revealed what she herself would have answered to this proposal, but she mutely turned to her father.

“Why not?” said he. He could read her wishes in her face, and for him that was sufficient. “I am sorry I cannot drive you in. I have sent away our trap

to get an alteration made in it. But a walk will be pleasant enough on so fine a morning."

"Yes, indeed," said this lucky young man, before whom an entrancing prospect had just been opened at the very moment when he thought the gates of Paradise were about to be closed on him.

And meanwhile Nan had sped away to make some change in her attire; and when she reappeared the straw hat had been discarded for something of a more young-ladyish kind, while her costume generally bore evidences of attention and care. Then they left the house together, and passed along the lane, and, under her guidance, entered a beech wood, where the soft carpet of coppery leaves, the legacy of the previous autumn, was not yet quite hidden by the young grass and the half-uncurled fronds of the bracken. It was very still and quiet in this wood; their footfalls sounded strangely. Sometimes a sigh of wind would stir the

topmost branches with a moan as of some distant sea; then again peace and silence, save for the light crackling tread as they walked. There was a shadowed twilight in here, but far away through the tall stems they could see a warmer glow, the glow of the shining world without.

"I hear you are very proud of your garden," he said to her amid their multifarious light-hearted talk. "I suppose it keeps you quite busy."

"And a very good thing too," her father put in, in his mild way. "For, you see, she has been quietly brought up, and she has few friends and hardly any acquaintances; and if she were not kept interested by her gardening, I'm afraid it might be rather dull for her at Crowhurst."

"Dull, Dodo?" she exclaimed. "I haven't time to be dull. It isn't only helping old John in the garden, it's a hundred different things. And here is another;" for they had come to some wide patches of

woodruff—innumerable small white stars set in tiny green whorls of leaves. “I must have whole armfuls of that woodruff gathered to sweeten the cupboards and the linen-chests.”

And then Sidney, eager to join in on any excuse, must needs tell her of the why and wherefore of the name—woodreeve—waldmeister; from which it was but a step to the other herbs that increased in fragrance after they were cut and dried; and these again led on to the mysterious plant that looks so innocent in dell or dingle, but when transferred to the herbarium discloses all sorts of jet-black imps and hobgoblins on the blue sheet. At random, unreservedly, with quick and happy give and take, they talked of every haphazard thing that presented itself. Though for the most part Mr. Summers listened, he seemed pleased to see his daughter in such high spirits. Whenever his eyes were turned in her direction they grew soft and kind.

Then the ferns and the woodruff gave place to briars, which dragged at her dress, so that she was forced to return to the highway. And here they came again in sight of the wider landscape—upland fields and hedges dappled with sunlight and shadow; the slow moving arms of a wind-mill on the high sky-line; far away in the east softly wooded hills, with one solitary white mansion set amongst the shimmering sunny green. None the less was it a changeable, indeterminate sort of day. As they continued on—Sidney thinking only of the bewitching music of this girl's voice, and the fascination of her careless laughter, and even the inexplicable charm of the light and free fashion in which she walked—they became aware of a curious darkness all around. It broadened out. The green of the fields near them became livid and intense. Overhead a pall of sombre purple had slowly gathered itself together in the midst of the noonday heat; there was a

weight of menace in the louring sky. And at last came one or two heavy drops of rain.

“There may be a shower,” Mr. Summers said; “we’d better wait for a bit under those elms.”

And so they left the highway, and went and stood under the spreading branches of one of the largest of the trees, close by the rugged trunk. As for Sidney, this was but another godsend, another marvellous stroke of good fortune; there was to be some little addition to those priceless minutes that had been all too surely slipping away. What did he care if the surrounding landscape grew black as night, so long as all the sunshine of the world was near to him—in those stray waifs of golden-brown hair that clustered around her neck and ears? This overshadowing gloom was the welcomest thing that could happen; it kept her almost within touch of him; he could detect some slight perfume from the silk ribbons of her

bonnet. With her parasol, or with the timid toe of her boot, she toyed with the scant spears of grass; he could watch the out-curving lashes that hid the too eloquent eyes. And when she laughed, it was a quiet sort of laughter; she rarely looked up.

But this happy imprisonment was not to last. By-and-by there was a perceptible lightening of that brooding darkness; there came a brisker stirring of wind; the fields and spinneys began to resume their natural colour. Presently, as they still lingered to make sure, a dazzling gleam of blue and silver overhead, through the topmost branches of the elms, told them that the threatening storm-cloud was peacefully passing over; and as they stepped out into the road a glory of sunshine fell around them, and oak and ash and hawthorn hedge, with the golden buttercups among the grass, were all rustling and swaying and nodding in the cheerful warmth.

But what particularly struck Sidney, even amidst the bewilderment of these rare opportunities and this light and joyous talk, was the studious way in which the girl's father kept himself in the background. This powerfully built man, with his quiet demeanour and patient eyes, seemed to have not one atom of self-assertion ; he appeared never to think about himself at all ; his care was solely lavished upon his daughter, and that in a singularly humble and wistful way. He almost seemed to treat her with deference, as if she were some superior being, so abject was his affection. If he saw her smiling and interested, he did not seek to join in the conversation at all. When he looked to make sure that the storm-cloud had passed over, it was on her account, not his own. When he was appealed to about any projected excursion or the like, it was to his daughter's face that he instinctively turned to learn whether he was to say yes or no. It

was an unusual attitude of father towards child ; but not less remarkable was the fact that it had resulted in no sort or kind of spoiling. The girl appeared to return his devotion a hundred times over ; some little touch or caress now and again told of the confidence and trust between them ; and if he were given to an unnecessary diffidence and self-effacement, that was not in the least with her consent or approval, for she lost no chance of belauding him and proclaiming her faith in him. All this position of affairs was clear enough to Sidney Hume, and he was not slow to take advantage of it—in his present desperate need.

For they had now reached the top of Gravel Hill, and were about to descend into Henley ; and he was distractedly conscious that in a few minutes he would be saying good-bye to them, without any distinct assurance as to their meeting again. And so, as it were by accident, but really

with some wild incoherent purpose, he recalled her father's exploit of the day before in the Fair Mile, and praised it highly, and made much of it, and said how people had always admired feats of physical strength and skill; how the natural man loved fighting; how the Greeks had glorified boxing and wrestling; how even a king's son had stepped into the ring at the funeral games of Patroklos. To all this she listened with great favour, and even with some little air of triumph. He could see how pleased she was. She glanced over to her father as if to say, "Do you hear that, Dodo?" But the young man, in rapid furtherance of his own daring schemes, went on to speak of the tendency in the popular mind to transform heroic deeds into myths, and he wondered whether the tusks shown in Rome were really those of the boar killed by Meleager. Now it is surely a far cry from knocking over two navvies in the Oxford Road to the hunting of the wild

boar in Calydon; but there are rivers in Macedon and Monmouth, and on this occasion the connection served, for he proceeded to remark, in a casual kind of manner,

“One would like to know what kind of beast it really was that St. George slew over there in Berkshire.”

“In Berkshire? St. George?” she asked, with puzzled eyes.

“Yes,” he answered her straightway. “Haven’t you heard of Dragon Hill, near by Uffington, where St. George slew the ravenous beast? Oh, but you must certainly drive over there. Well, it might be too far to drive there and back in one day, but you could easily go by rail to some neighbouring town, and then hire a trap. Wantage, for example—why, surely you ought to see the birthplace of King Alfred; and then there is the great white horse cut on the hill-side to commemorate the battle of Ashdown—all close by. Supposing, now,

I were to plan out an excursion, would you let me be your guide for the day? ”

So this was what he had been occultly driving at by means of Euryalos, and Meleager, and the bacon saint? And for a second of suspense her answer seemed doubtful. It was a bold thing for him to ask and for her to grant, seeing how short-lived had been their knowledge of each other. But then his praise of her father's strength and skill had left her in a grateful mood; and if the request was audacious, the manner of making it was modest enough; and perhaps, she may have thought, as for a moment she regarded his supplicating eyes, a refusal might appear a little hard-hearted. So she turned to her father.

“What do you say, Dodo?”

“Well, would you like it, Nan?” he made answer, with his invariable deference to her own inclination. “Just what you would like, you know. You deserve a

holiday from your housekeeping. And it might make a little break. You must not let Crowhurst become monotonous; that would never do."

Then she turned again to Sidney.

"Are you sure it would not be taking up too much of your time?"

"Oh! I shall be delighted," he exclaimed, joyfully. "And I will make all the necessary inquiries, and will find out what the best plan will be. Then I will come out to Crowhurst, and you can fix whichever day you may think will suit."

"It is so very kind of you," she said; and the speedwell eyes, grown brave for a second, also conveyed to him her thanks, and perhaps something more, now that she was about to bid him farewell. For they had come to the corner of Bell Street, and there was no longer any excuse for his lingering in their society.

But this was no tragic parting, no hopeless and irrevocable good-bye. Even as he

mutely pressed her hand, and had his last glimpse of her downcast face, rose-tinted, radiant, bashful, he knew that there were to be more of those clear-shining June mornings, in a wonderland of flowers and scents and sunlit colours, with the young queen of all these beautiful things, herself more beautiful than any of them, no longer possessed of any dread of him, but bland, complaisant, with kindness and gratitude in her lucent eyes.

Nevertheless, on this afternoon and evening, being left all to himself and his own forecasts and imaginings, he fell into a curiously morbid and disquieted and restless mood. His mind was filled with vague apprehensions, formless and unreasoned things, shapeless phantoms that seemed to threaten him out of the future. There was no rejoicing in that he had so far established a certain relationship with this beautiful friend; he longed for more; he longed for some assurance of the per-

manence of that relationship ; he longed to be near her, to know that she had not already quite forgotten. By this time she would be back at Crowhurst ; and it was with a dull inexplicable pain that he thought of the distance that lay between him and her, and of the possibility of her attention being given to this or that in which he had no concern. If she had forgotten, he had not ; with the most extraordinary vividness he could recall every feature and incident of that enchanted morning walk—the joyous stroll through the beech wood, the black cloud gathering in the blue and white, their halt under the elm, her moving the blades of grass with her small out-peeping foot, her shadowed face and exquisite profile. And quite clearly—in this river-side silence that was only broken by the clink and clank of some belated boat or by the distant laughter of some girls going home—he could recall the magical sound of her voice, with certain peculiarities that had for him an irresistible

fascination. For example, she slightly lengthened the diphthong in such words as *town, now, out, abound*, and this was to him like music. He had never heard any one speak quite in this manner before, and his heart thrilled in response. It was only an additional wonder in this incomparable creature that seemed to consist of wonders—of smiles that were like sunlight, and glances that all unwittingly struck merciless and deep.

Walking up and down in the twilight, as the river gradually became deserted, and here and there the golden star of a gas-lamp glimmered through the green foliage, he thought he might as well take out and read more carefully a letter he had received that afternoon from London. It was Mrs. Hume who was the writer, and she was inclined to be angry in her remonstrances. Lady Helen—dearest Helen, rather—had more than once expressed surprise over his absence; and no wonder. Were there not

books enough in the British Museum, or at the London Library? The season was in full swing, a brilliant round of festivities; everybody meeting everybody, and going everywhere. Why should he immure himself in the country? The Greeks had had their day.

Well, this reference to his favourite studies for a moment recalled to his mind the Dionysiac folk whom he had left lone-wandering in those hollow centuries that are all so silent now. But they seemed remote and voiceless—shadows that hardly concerned him; whereas the actual and living world around him had suddenly become filled with the strangest and wildest possibilities; and he himself was being racked and rent by conflicting agitations—a passionate and unappeasable longing and heart-hunger; forebodings, misgivings, that were terrible in their very vagueness; then, again, bewildering hopes and masterful grapplings with fate and circumstance

outrunning all reason and limit; and these, again, in agonising recoil, succeeded by a poignant and hopeless sense of the unattainable that was at times near akin to despair.

END OF VOL. I.





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